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BY

PRICE WARUNG

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AND

TALES OF THE RIVERINE

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BY

PRICE WARUNG

AUTHOR OF
'TALES OF THE EARLY AUSTRALIAN DAYS,' 'TALES OF THE OLD RÉGIME,'
'TALES OF THE ISLE OF DEATH,' ETC.

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TO "LOIS"

A SIMPLE ACKNOWLEDGMENT OF A DEVOTED LIFE

NOTE

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TALES OF THE RIVERINE

IN PUGGA MILLY REACH

I

Big, burly Tom M'Grundy, with the thirst of a sponge, features of a red, red nose, the heart of an angel, and the financial genius of a Wilkins Micawber—his I. O. U.s and P. N.s would have covered the Old Man Plain with a pavement of tesselated indebtedness—drove up to the boats as they were raising steam for the trip to Echuca. They had dropped down from the wharves overnight, and had tied up at the south bank of the Murrumbidgee, just below the bend in the stream where the one hundred and fifty acre police paddock runs into Mungadel Station. Both the steamers—the *Jessie Jane* and the *Resolution*—were under M'Grundy's agency, and while there was no dodge that Mac could not work to steal a

march upon an opposing firm—the rivers ring yet with the way he "did" McCulloch's Hay manager (Fehon, present N. S. W. Railway Commissioner, was boss of the big concern then) out of £2000 worth of wool freight—he was studiously just to the several owners he represented. He tapped them for loans and drinks with equal impartiality, and he gave the "little" men with the one cranky steamer and the solitary crazy barge the same show for cutting a plummy slice out of the rich cake of the season's wool-traffic, as he did the "bigger" men, who had half-a-dozen steamers and twice as many barges. No flunkey-ish, kiss-his-hand favouritism to the well-in owner was ever shown by Tom M'Grundy, and it would have been better for the small men on the rivers had all the agents and managers followed his lead.

The *Jessie Jane* was a small man's craft, skippered by its owner, and under the double disadvantage of carrying with its cargo an eternally-on-the-eve-of-going-to-blazes boiler and a tremendous mortgage; while the *Resolution* belonged to a man who was being helped literally by a bank, and who—though bound to go under some time like all bank-made creatures (some day I'll recite certain legends of a Riverina bank-sweating

room)—would be "on the top" for five seasons or so. Therefore Tom M'Grundy would, without doubt, have found it in the long run much more to his own profit had he favoured the *Resolution*. But that was not his way of doing business.

As he drew rein on the sandy hummock, he hailed the crafts which the freshet was jostling restlessly against one another. The gilded, brassy *Resolution*, with a barge lashed a-beam, lay astern of the beggarly *Jessie Jane*, which looked as if the current half-year's interest on the mortgage now just due would sink her to the bottom of the river; and the big boat now and then stuck her nose more viciously into her shabby rival, as though she would smash her from very contempt. The *Resolution* and her barge were carrying twelve hundred bales of "way back" clips, and the tarpaulined pile towered majestically above the four hundred which were all the *Jessie* and her barge were permitted by stern Tommy Freeman, the Echuca representative of the Melbourne Underwriters' Association, to load up with.

The contrast between the two crafts was so forcible, that even unreflective Tom Mac was struck by it, and hesitated, after hailing, as to whether it would not, as a mere matter of business, be the better policy to give the commis-

sion direct to the *Resolution*, instead of making it a matter of competition. Before he could decide, however, slim Jim Barton, owner and master of the *Jessie Jane*, was clambering up the bank in answer to his call.

"Morning, Mr. Mac! What's up? Anything fresh?"

"Morning, Jim. Yes, there's a fresh freight offering, but I'm going to give you and the *Resolution* the chance of it. It will all depend on who can get to Echuca first, and back to Mungadel!"

"Oh, racing!" Jim's face, which had lit up with the agent's first words, lost its animation. "I'm not on. I can't race, and I'm not going to run risks of that sort."

"Well," said sympathetic Mac, "it isn't exactly a race, Jim. But look here, wait till that lazy lubber of a Linton comes. Damn. You'd think that chap was commodore of the Pacific squadron, he puts on so much side! Now, Linton —I say, Linton, Skipper Linton, hurry up, man!"

"Aye, aye, Mr. M'Grundy, I'm coming!" and slowly, as became the master of the dashingest new boat on the rivers, not to mention his antecedents as an officer of Money-Wigrams line, he walked from his state-room—they were

"state-rooms" on the *Resolution*, and "cabooses" on the *Jessie Jane*—to the gangway. There he stopped.

"Breakfasted, Mr. M'Grundy?" he drawled.

"No," growled the agent, losing patience. "But I'm just going to have a bite with Barton here. I want to see you first. Look sharp!"

And while the dandy of the boating was digesting the unceremonious speech in his slow walk, Mac turned to Barton and said—"Can't stand his damned nonsense, Jim, so I'll take a bit with you if you don't mind."

"Very welcome, Mr. Mac, of course, but I can't give you ham-and-chicken and wine, you know. We've only salmon and tea." And Jim laughed.

"'Better,' as Solomon says, 'tinned fish and billy tea where no side is, than a French dinner with show and bounce,'" said Mr. M'Grundy; and then, as Captain Linton drew near, he communicated his news.

"Look here, chaps, after you dropped down last night, Tom Lang of Mungadel came to me. He says by the time you get to Echuca, sixty tons of Ryland's wire ought to be there. Now, it's a matter of first importance that he should get it here within a fortnight. It's for his back country, and he can get teams now for next to

nothing, and if he misses the chance it's all up with his back-country improvements for a year."

"Well," broke in Linton, as Mac stopped for breath, "McCullochs' Lang's agents, they can run it down easily!"

"That's just it. They say they can't. They're rather cocky, and say wire loading must wait their boat's convenience, and there's a rush of higher-priced freight, and they won't take more wire than makes a fair proportion of dead-weight."

"That's the case with everybody," said Linton, "unless," he added superciliously, "it suits Barton here."

"All right, Dick Linton, if you turn up your nose at a good thing before you know what it is, that's your own look-out. If I hadn't promised Mr. Lang to put the proposal before you both, I'm blest if I wouldn't give it to Jim straight."

Grundy was getting nettled.

"Well," said Linton, now scenting something below the surface, "I don't see as there can be much in it for anybody when the big firm say no to it."

"Ah, but the big firm haven't had the chance of saying no to what I offer you two. Lang's temper's up, and he'll give special terms to get this wire here in the time."

"What are they?"

"Double rates for the wire, thirty tons Ballarat chaff—must be Ballarat, if you can pick it up at Echuca while you are there, without waiting—at six ten,—that ought to give you a couple of pounds a ton profit—and——" He paused to give a rhetorical effect to his next sentence.

"Don't be all day, Mac; time's slipping along," said Linton.

"All his lading down and up for this and the next season."

"By George, those are grand terms, Mr. Mac," said Barton. "He must want that wire badly."

"He does. You see, he'll save about six pounds per ton in back-loading, and Heaven knows how much by getting his back-blocks fenced in before next year; besides, there's the dishing of McCulloch. That's worth something to a man like Lang, who makes something out of other people's necessities."

"But, Mr. Mac, what have we to do? Do we get the loading between us?" questioned the *Jessie Jane's* skipper.

"No, that's not it. The first boat of you two ready to take it from the cranes at Echuca wharf has the whole contract. That's the offer!"

The two skippers eyed each other. Barton, for the life of him, could not prevent the blood rushing into his cheeks at the thought that, if he could only pull off this job, what a tremendous difference it would make to his fortunes. Linton's personal interest in the prospective achievement was not so large as Barton's, but it was still great. It would not only mean a big commission, but it would be something to talk about. "How I did McCulloch's out of the Mungadel contract," would be a tale that would tell well when conversing next time with the inspector of the Bank of Australia Felix, who was finding the capital for the new steamer-line to which the *Resolution* belonged. Linton did not care much for money, except as it enabled him to play "the swell," but he was vain as a peacock or a poet—Lord! he would be somebody on the rivers if he could manage to snatch the Mungadel clip from the maw of the big firm. Who knows but that, perhaps, the bank inspector would suggest that Linton be made commodore of the new line, or perhaps build a boat—a regular clipper it should be—for him! And so, realizing in a flash of thought all the offer involved, he jumped at it.

"I'm on, Mr. M'Grundy!" he said. "I'll do it if you'll give me the order."

"No, Lang says I'm not to bind myself to either

boat. A fair field, he says, and no tricks, and it's as open to the *Jessie* as to the *Resolution*."

"Oh, but," interjected Linton, "you're out of it from the start, Barton. Look at my haulage power over yours."

"Look at your load to mine!" retorted Barton.

"You know what old Freeman said? It's the gossip of all the Riverine when he last surveyed you. He said that if you put pressure on the *Jessie's* boiler—and you survived—he'd get your licence cancelled. And without your licence you can't insure, and without insurance much freight you'd have!"

Linton showed his desire for the contract by the bitterness of his sneer.

"Well!" retorted Barton, "if the *Jessie* does blow up she'll only kill six, not sixty!"

A mighty guffaw from M'Grundy expressed his appreciation of Barton's remark, and the angry colour in Linton's cheek was other testimony to its force. Barton had referred to a grim river tradition, that Linton had had his mate's certificate cancelled by the Board of Trade, because of his running down in the English Channel a Greek vessel with sixty lives on board. There were, at this time, a score of "sea-going" officers engaged in the river-trade—two or three (including Linton)

in command, and several more as mates, the most as deck-hands. One of two reasons—often the two combined — usually explained why these mariners had left the rolling wave for the river. Drink or disaster, if it were not drink and disaster —one or the other, or one and the other. And the suspicion of past failure being upon these sons of the salt sea, they were not beloved or admired by the Croweaters and Cornstalks and Gumsuckers, who, with an ex-Mississippian, bossed the river-craft fourteen to twenty years ago.

Men to the rivers born were never tired of relating how C——, of the *Princess*, whose certificates (in their uncancelled state) should have obtained for him command of an Atlantic liner, hauled up at midday at Pental Island. The river was shallowing rapidly,—five feet at Albury, fifteen at Echuca, and ten at Swan Hill,—and as every moment was precious the mate objected, "Wot d'yer want stopping here for, skipper?"

"Oh!" said C——, "I'm going to take an observation. There's no latitude nor longitude marked on the chart."

"H—l!" cried the mate, "wot d'yer want latitood and longitood for? Ain't yer got that blawsted box there by the wood-pile to steer by?"

And the roar with which the anecdote was ever welcomed, defined the precise degree of depreciation in which the "ocean-going" chaps were regarded by the river-men proper.

Now, Barton was a Croweater, had been born on the Lower Murray in the very year ('53) that Cadell had taken up the *Lady Augusta;* and he had grown up with the boat-trade. Consequently he was not predisposed to look upon Linton with the friendliest eye; and when he saw that Linton was resolved to achieve the Mungadel contract, the getting of which would alter his (Barton's) whole career materially for the better, he would have been more than human had he refrained from meeting taunt with taunt. But, to tell the truth, he felt for the moment that the prize was as good as lost when he saw how Linton writhed under his retort, for then he knew that neither fair nor foul means would be spared by the *Resolution's* skipper to get the job. To a man who would not fight fair there were lots of ways open of impeding a competitor for a cargo. A five-pound note pushed surreptitiously into a stevedore's hand had more than once led to the sinking of a barge as it lay loaded under the cranes at Echuca wharf. There was that Cumberoona episode, when Harry Clifton was 'Chuca

manager for McCulloch's. But it must be a story for another time.

* * * * *

When M'Grundy's laugh had exhausted itself, Linton, looking like a thunder-cloud, said—

"And what's to be your share of the bunce, M'Grundy?"

The agent hesitated. Should it be a P.N. at three months?—Mac's P.N. at three days after doomsday would have been negotiable—or there was that bay pony Tom Palmer of Caroon had offered him for a song, *cash*. Which should it be? At last—

"Usual agency charges, boys—no more. But you know there's a nice little pony hack Tom Palmer has—I wouldn't refuse that from either of you as an unofficial present, boys——"

"All right, Mr. Mac, if I get the job, pony's yours," said Barton, and Linton also acquiesced, but with sullenness. It was well enough for that fellow Barton to promise a bonus when he ran no risk of being called upon to pay it, but Linton thought he'd be dashed if he'd a-promised it if it had been left to himself, after the way M'Grundy had laughed at him.

And so it was arranged. First under the 'Chuca cranes, ready to take in the wire, was to

have the whole Mungadel business through the now just opening season and the following year as well. And when, after a hurried breakfast in the shabby little cabin of the *Jessie Jane*, he hurriedly shook hands with Barton, he fervently hoped the little one would take the game off.

"It'll make you, Jim, if you do," he exclaimed.

II

Three days afterwards the boats were at Swan Hill together. What the big boat gained during the day she lost during the night.

Jim knew the river intimately, while the skipper of the *Resolution* had to find his course by the rude charts of the river-men, and not being backed by a life-acquaintance with the characteristics of the stream, he was often in a tangle. When he found himself—as frequently happened—gingerly steering through deep water where the chart showed a sand-spit, he had always a fear that he might find a sand-spit calmly embracing a snag where the paper marked ten or twelve feet of water. He was under the necessity, therefore, of tying up at nightfall. Jim, on the other hand, ran as long as he could at night, without breaking his

engineer and fireman, while the man who (assuming his certificates were all right) could have taken a Cunarder to Sandy Hook, or brought out a P. and O. boat from Southampton to Melbourne, was compelled to grin and bear the sting as best he might, when the *Jessie*, whom he had passed hours before, returned the compliment after nightfall. The three sharp whistles with which the *Jessie* would greet him sounded saucily, and her exhaust, he could have sworn, checked him. And, if those mechanical taunts were not sufficient, he was compelled to hear wordy insults that incurably hurt his vanity.

"Skipper!" would sing out all the barge-men, as the *Jessie Jane* came abreast of the *Resolution*, "blest if that ain't Toff Linton's boat. Wot's he waitin' for?"

Jim would maintain a decent silence, then the barge-man would answer himself.

"He's hopin', surely, as the moon 'll rise soon, so's he can take the long'tood."

Then the deck-hands would join in: "No, that 'tain't it. He's waitin' for the dew to fall, so's he can get some way on her."

"You're wrong, all o' you," would now interject the mate. "His crew's struck. He war pilotin' the boat up the billabong backwater."

"Ga—arn," another rouseabout would sneer. "He's an appointment with Black Nell at the Melool wood-pile, and he carn't wax his moustache while the boat's a-steamin', so he ties up."

So the jokers of the river would dash their humours against the sides of his cabin. Their joking had the additional bitterness for Linton, that it was never answered by his own men. An impressive characteristic of the river was, that the men of a boat were loyal to their skipper, as a rule. Let the skipper be trying to make a point in a trip or to score off a rival—either by coarse chaff or by sheer rapid steaming—and they would help him with lung and limb, forfeit for him their sleep and meal-time, or even effect that most precious of sacrifices, the abandonment of their "between-trip sprees." And when his men did not champion a skipper through good report and through evil report, and back him up in straight river reaches, and over the moral snags, generally of the feminine order, that were always on the shore in readiness to wreck any "boat chap," you may safely depend that the skipper wasn't "white." Now Linton's crew never "jawed back" when the *Jessie Jane's* fellows hurled their jibes at the *Resolution's* chief, and Linton had been long enough in the trade to take that as an emphatic

condemnation in advance of anything he might do. And therefore, being full of human nature, and not being a saint out of the missionary books, he grew as venomous and tyrannical as he dared. Certainly he did not dare greatly, democracy was too substantial a thing on the rivers twenty years ago to be assailed with impunity by a little tinselled god. It is flabbier now; boat-hands deputationize the deity of the pilot-house now, where in the seventies they would have seen whether the Murray a' Bidgee water wouldn't have taken some of the lace-frilled nonsense out of him.

When the boats, then, were at Swan Hill, it was an even chance which should get through first at 'Chuca, and so gain the first shot at the cranes.

The *Resolution* would, without doubt, with her superior power, beat the *Jessie* by four hours if there was clear daylight running all the way, and it would be a remarkable thing indeed if, with that advantage, she could not win the Mungadel job. But the four hours were just the difference the *Jessie* could make up by nightfall, in the twenty-four to thirty-hour run from Castle Donnington (Swan Hill) to Echuca. Thus honours were easy.

Linton and Barton met at Echuca, just as the

latter had dispatched the wire most boat-masters send thence to Echuca.

Barton cheerily nodded a "Morning," which Linton surlily acknowledged.

"It'll be nose and nose work, Captain Linton," said the *Jessie's* skipper.

"Bosh! you're out of it. I'm not going to race either!"

"Nor I; fair heel-and-toe running—that's what I'm going to make of it."

"I'd not bother if I were you. Save your fuel and the risk of a blow-up."

"Not a bit of it, old man. See the 'state' at Albury last Saturday?" And he pointed as he spoke to a bit of blue paper posted at the post-office, which recorded the state of the Murray, "above summer-level."

"Yes, twenty feet. What of that?"

"That means, old man, you're not going to get past Pugga Milly till that water comes down. I know you scraped getting over the Bitch and Pups."

"How the devil do you know that? By George! if any of my men have been blabbing!"

"Keep your temper—none of them's been blabbing. But, man, you needn't tell me you didn't

scrape. When you're down eight feet, and the water on the reef is eight feet also, you've got to scrape to get over. And *you* can't warp over Pugga Milly. I can if I need to !—but I won't !"

"Very well," and Linton turned to go. "Pugga Milly or no Pugga Milly I'm going to run Mungadel stores up and down for two seasons."

"Perhaps you may, Linton, if I give you a billet on the new barge I shall build, as soon as I finger the cash for the freight on the Mungadel wire now waiting for me at Echuca wharf."

Having fired this shot, Jim Barton prepared to send his telegram to the Echuca agents that he was just clearing from the "Hill." As he handed it in, and threw down the shilling, the operator, who had heard part of his conversation with Linton, asked him if he were racing the *Resolution*. In a few hurried words Jim related the conditions of the trip.

"Wish you luck, Jim, I'm sure," said the operator, as he pulled down the glass slides of the pigeon-hole. "If you get the Mungadel work it will be the making of you."

The words stuck persistently to Jim. Tom M'Grundy had said exactly the same thing. His mate kept on saying it. And now the E. T. O. man, who knew everybody's concerns on the

river, and whom everybody knew, repeated it. Since he had started, he had been trying to forget how much depended on the trip up to now. Doing his best to win, he had yet freed himself of thinking of the prize. But the blessed words stuck, and do what he would he could not forget them.

It would be the making of him indeed! And as the *Resolution* dropped into the stream, and the *Jessie Jane* followed her after a five minutes' interval, Jim, answering the former's horn with his shrill whistle, felt, as he turned the whistle-cock, that he was defying fortune as well as Linton's boat. The one thing that saves commerce from infecting with leprous taint all that she touches, is her alliance with the genius of home and the spirits of the household. Where this is absent, how contemptible is trade, how degrading is the whole system of barter and speculation!

Now Jim thirsted for gold, not to gratify his vanity or the mere lust of getting, but in order to obtain the means of enriching his own individual life with the good things that life in general offers to man. He wanted gold to win and keep a wife, and to rear "an independent shed." He wanted the means to enjoy honourable leisure, and for books, travel, anything that would make him a

stronger and more fruitful man. He had ambitions, had this mallee river-bred man, that were not bounded by the mallee-rim on the south side of the Murray, or by the box and gums on the north bank. Inch by inch he had carved a path upward. Inch by inch he would mount higher—if the Fates pleased. If a man's sinews and a man's thoughts could turn the sparse opportunities which offered into gold, they should be his. And here, right here, was the biggest chance yet within his grasp. Fail now, and he would run a mortgaged boat till Providence pleased that the boiler should blow up, with himself on board. Get the Mungadel contract, and through the long vista of coming years he saw himself moving on from success to success, and from triumph to triumph —first in the commercial world, and then—the ambition was so sacred as to be no more than half uttered to his own heart—in the political world. Jim, ordinarily clear-headed enough, was yet so simple as to believe that politics had some use for clean-souled men.

III

Every steamer's exhaust, to all river people, had its own message. Hitherto the *Jessie Jane's* escaping steam had but one reading—"Kiss Jessie —Jim! Kiss Jessie—Jim! Kiss Jessie—Jim!" That was the mode of it. But this morning there was a distinctly audible change. Whether it was the rotten old boiler had taken a new lease of life, or that some part of the engine had gone wrong, or, having previously gone wrong, was now determining to go right, or something still more recondite and unexplainable, but certainly the sibilation was no longer heard. Jim noticed it as soon as he got into a fair way. He called down the speaking-tube to the engineer.

"Something wrong with the exhaust, Charlie?" Charlie came up on the main deck.

"Yes, skipper, she's changed her tune. Steam-pipe's got a bit choked, I expect. What does she say? Breakin' somethin', it sounds like."

"'Make you, break you—Jim! Make you, break you—Jim!' that's what it is, skipper," called out the mate. "Well, that's dashed funny, isn't it?"

"Very," replied Jim, who was leaning over the

half-door of the pilot-house. And his heart throbbed painfully as the alternative to being "made" was voiced by the steam. Of course that was nonsense. If he did not get the Mungadel contract he would be no worse off than before. And if he did—well, he'd be made. Mortgage paid off, and open credit for a round thousand over-draft at the bank. Then he would build a new barge for next season, and with the prestige of one of the big frontage station contracts behind him, he would not be dependent on agencies' mercies, but would tackle half-a-dozen of the big back-blocks stations himself. Pull off Mungadel, and he would not change places with McCullochs! The next season would see him worth three thousand, and all squarely earned, clean money. How many of the river-men would be able to say the same? By Heavens, he *would* have the contract! And, to cheer him, came another tune on the exhaust, "Make you, make you—Jim."

That was it, then. Even the crazy old boat and boiler were bent on winning. Listen again! "Make you, make you—Jim!" Nothing more about "Break you!"

And he went to his bunk with a lighter spirit to gain a few hours' sleep. He was going to run

all night and take the wheel himself. The "Make you, make you—Jim!" was a lullaby to him.

But as the dusk was rapidly filling the gap between the clumps of gums on the banks, and the only light on the stream was from the great reflecting lamps already ablaze, the mate sent the half-fledged hobbledehoy, who acted as cabin-boy for his keep, down to wake his skipper. And as Jim ran up-stairs to the pilot-deck, he heard once more the fateful murmur, "Make you, break you—Jim." No mistake this time. There was the "break you" quite distinct, and with a threatening accent too. So fancied the fevered brain of the captain.

"Say, skipper," said the mate, "I woke you a little sooner than you said, but there's some one on Pugga Milly signallin'."

Pugga Milly Island, formed by a branch and the main stream, was in shadow, but across the great reach which forms the river there were broad flashes of light. They were not from the *Resolution* and her barge. The great steamer and her consort were tying up for the night on the south bank, Linton having gone as far as he dared that day. He hoped that the fresh water from the Upper Murray would be down by daybreak to carry him over the shoal at the head of the reach,

and so avoid the necessity for warping the craft up by means of lines from the trees. If he was not compelled to warp he could (by putting on another 10 lbs. of steam) overtake the *Jessie Jane*, and beat her through the Echuca port.

And as he put out his regulations, he cursed the regulations which compelled him to aid in the illumination of the stream. The more light in so stiff a part of the river the better for his rival.

But the broad flashes Jim noticed were not the steady fanlight beams of the *Resolution's* lamps. They were intermittent, now wavered by the breeze, now blown into vivid lightning-like zig-zags that shivered and darted into the interstices of the timber, and startled ducks and curlews and native companions from the lagoons. And a figure was now seen in the blaze, and now hidden by it.

"Yes," said Jim, "that's a signal or else a dodge. P'r'aps the *Resolution* has sent a man there to trick us. Anyhow, if it's a passenger we're not going to take him."

For of course if it were a passenger, and would-be passengers emerged from most unlikely places on the rivers, it must be a male. None but a crank would have supposed a woman would be there.

IV

Yet when the *Jessie* came abreast of the lower point of Pugga Milly—she took the inner channel, because of lighter draught—Skipper Barton saw that it was a woman who was standing by the signal fire, a woman holding something in her arms, even when she stooped to throw another branch of sapling on the flames.

"Jupiter!" cried the mate. "It's a petticoat."

Jim, prescient of trouble, was silent. And the infernal exhaust was now humming another and more sardonic tune, "Break you, break you—Jim!" Nothing about "making" him now, only "breaking."

"Slow her down!" Jim ordered at last. And the craft trembled reluctantly to half speed.

"Oh!" the woman cried, "oh, stop—for God's sake, stop!" And the *Jessie Jane*, with much inward and outward cursing from her officers, was eased down about twenty yards from the island bank.

"What is it, ma'am?" Jim spoke with marvellous distinctness considering his throat was full of maledictions. "Going to Echuca?"

"No; Swan Hill!" She stopped, choking.

Jim gave a sigh of relief before he spoke again. "But we're going to Echuca."

"Oh!" It was a long wail this time. "O—oh, Echuca's too far—my child is dyin'—dyin', and I must have a doctor. Oh, take me to Swan Hill!"

"Impossible, ma'am. I'll take you to Echuca—there are better doctors there."

"But Swan Hill's nearer—three hours, and—Echuca, oh God, is twenty or thirty. And my child is dyin'—is dyin'!"

Jim and the mate looked at one another. Then the mate uttered an inquiry as to whether she had asked another boat.

"Yes," she wailed, "but they would not listen. Said you were comin'. Oh, for God's sake, take me! I have a pound—it is all I have. I'll give you that!"

A pound! Jim's throat blistered. And fifteen hundred pounds clear profit hanging on that trip! A pound! The joke of it! And so he said "No," and in the same breath sent the telegraph call to the engine-room—"Full speed ahead!"

When the woman saw the *Jessie's* steam curving towards mid-stream, she shrieked with a horrible acuteness of sound. Over the exhaust was plainly audible—"Oh, are you men? Fiends you are. May God blight your homes—your wives—

your children! May you have your little ones dyin' for the sake of a doctor some one else could reach, but wouldn't! Oh, devils!"

Now in Jim's dream that day, of what might be if he pulled off the Mungadel job, was included a home and a wife and babies clinging around. There was no wife as yet, not even a sweetheart. But he had always thought that the glory of his manhood would never be achieved until he held wife and child in the sway of his strong arm. And the woman's unreasoning cry pierced him with a superstitious fear.

He signalled the engineer to slow down. "But," he asked the mate, "is there a man aboard who'd take that woman in a dingy to Swan Hill?"

"A forty-mile pull! You're drunk, boss."

"No, Bill, not drunk—only mad! I'm going to take that woman to the Hill. Damn her!—and damn Tom Lang of Mungadel!"

V

Less for the sake of that poor selector's wife than for his own dream of wife and child, he tied up his barge and turned his steamer's head towards the Hill township.

The woman's only intelligence lay in her mother love. She was one of those half-souled creatures that drift through life in the Australian bush, going through most of the acts of the great drama of existence in a tadpolish fashion, but who suddenly rise in the crisis of an episode to something of the stature of a civilized woman.

When her child was seized with convulsions, she had waded through the scrub, and waded through lagoons, ten miles from her husband's selection—he was away shearing—to the river-bank, with the dim hope of getting a doctor somehow. It was really Linton who had put it into her head to ask Barton to take her to Swan Hill. With the ignorant woman's inability to look at more than one thing at a time, she became convinced that in going to Swan Hill lay hope for her child; and in the tragic moment when she had made her last and successful appeal to Jim, she had struck the one chord of his nature to which his will would respond.

* * * * *

Half-way to the lower township the infant must have died. But the men did not know it, and the woman did not apparently realize it. She had fallen into a stupor of exhaustion, only rousing herself once when engineer Charlie, a father him-

self, had endeavoured to take the child from her and put it into a hot bath. Then she defied him to touch it. It was eleven o'clock when the puntman at the Hill was roused, and begged by Jim to take the woman to a doctor. She had to be lifted over the boat-side, and then it was that, as the mate forced the child from her, so that she herself might be carried to the shore, he discovered it was dead.

"Dead!" he exclaimed. "Dead and cold."

"Dead!" she shrieked, "dead! Oh, you devils! you've killed it. If you'd come when I asked you first it would not ha' died!" And that was Jim's thanks and reward.

* * * * *

At least all that fell within human ken. "All-judging Jove" may, however, have viewed the issues differently.

The *Jessie Jane* was still breathing her fatal exhaust, "Break you, break you—Jim!" when she reached Pugga Milly again. By that time twenty-four hours' steaming had done its work on the engineer and fireman. She was hauling in the tow-rope of the barge, and the latter craft was just beginning to cut the stream, when——

The *Jessie Jane*, and her skipper, and mate, and engineer, and one deck-hand, and the hopes

of the Mungadel contract, and the mortgage went skywards (and literally on to Pugga Milly Island) at the instance of the *Jessie Jane's* boiler. The pressure-gauge had registered more and more as the eyes of engineer Charlie and his fireman had become heavier, and ten minutes after the eyelids had closed entirely, the index-hand of the gauge had reached what old Freeman called "explosion point." Charlie had been roused by the skipper hailing the barge when the *Jessie* reached Pugga Milly, but, still drowsy, had not noticed the gauge, till the sudden hiss of the enfranchised steam merged and thundered into a roar like the trumpet of doom. And that was the end of everything for the *Jessie Jane* and her crew.

When the Echuca Steam Navigation Board investigated the circumstances, sufficient came out, in the evidence of his own men, to take some of the gilding from the glory of Skipper Linton's achievement. And he received a round-robin from the boat-skippers one day that suggested that he should return to the ocean-going trade, and run down some more Greeks. They wanted "white" men on the rivers, so the note said. Tom M'Grundy did not get his pony—then.

THE IDYL OF MELOOL WOOD-PILE

THE time was 8.50 on an August afternoon in 187—. The old *Pride of the Murray*, trustiest of river steamers, was making ready to swing into the stream for another of her profitable trips from Echuca to the Darling. Captain "Bill" Davies, senior and most respected of the river-skippers, and the most encyclopædic of authorities on snags and shallows, currents and channels, and all other detail of riverine science, had just stepped into the pilot-house; a deck-hand was paddling across to the old and stolid red-gum stump in Air and Westegard's boat-building yard on the Moama bank, to fix the warp to guide round her head; the huge steam-wheel had just beaten the turgid water into foam with a preliminary clash and lash; the Custom-house officers had performed the solemn task of clearance; and the crowd of wharf loafers and stevedores' men were canvassing the relative chances as to whether "Old Bill" would

let his barge drop through the punt first and then pick her up, or whether he would adopt the quicker but riskier proceeding of taking her in tow. All these things were happening or had happened, when one of the clerks attached to the office of McCulloch, the big shipping agent, came rushing up the wharf.

"Hold hard, Mr. Davies," he jerked out in breathless syllables, "we've another passenger for you—a lady!"

"Can't take her," growled the skipper; "I'm cleared, and steam's up."

One of the most genial of men and obliging of skippers, Captain Davies grew crusty at the numberless red-tapeisms of the border Customs; and as all passengers' names were supposed to be described in the clearance papers, any addition to the list after the final dab of sealing-wax to manifest and transire meant another hour's delay and overtime charges. Customs' overtime charges were no joke. The well-paid officials of Her Majesty's Custom-house at Echuca and Moama required double remuneration for crossing "t's" and dotting "i's" after four p.m. And this was, and is, but one of a score of ingenious contrivances for promoting brotherly love and reciprocal intercourse between Her Majesty's subjects on the

south side of the Murray and their fellow-subjects on the north.

"But, Captain, the lady says it's a case of urgency, and there'll be no other steamer for a couple of days."

"Can't take her!" came back from the pilot-house, the voice mingling with the creaking of the wheel as it revolved to the skipper's grasp. "Cast off the wharf lines for'ard there," and the whistle sent a shrill intimation to the puntman at old historic Hopewood's Ferry to open his pontoons.

"Sir, sir, do take me!" The steam shriek was breaking up in squally, discordant echoes when this cry was heard. There was a pathetic tremulousness in its appeal that compelled everybody within hearing—skipper, stevedores, boat-hands, loafers—to turn and gaze at the speaker. A tall, slender, darkly-draped figure, evidently the lady referred to by the shipping agent's clerk, stood against the wharf chains. A half-veil hid part of her features, but the rounded contour of the lower face and the sweet fulness of her voice revealed that she still enjoyed the richness of early womanly beauty.

"Two to one," whispered the *Pride's* cook to the steward, "the skipper won't back down."

The steward sneered at this offer to back a certainty, and didn't accept the wager.

It was a tradition on the river that "Captain Bill" never "backed down." Once he expressed an opinion, gave a decision, or determined upon a course of action, whether it was a big matter or a little matter, he was resolute, not to say obstinate. Whether it was a cargo of wool or a deck-hand's ration that was in question was all one.

"I'll clear your store of Momba bales as I come down stream," he said to the agent at Wilcannia. "I'm going up-river to load Gundabooka clip, and I'll top up with your lot."

But before he got back Momba teams had come in with another hundred and fifty bales of greasy. Instead of forty bales waiting him to top up, there were four times the quantity. He took them, however, and never left the pilot-house for an hour at a time during the fortnight of combat with treacherous channels, and blind snags, and falling rivers, that elapsed before he hung up his craft at Echuca bank.

It was proverbial, that load, in the annals of river-trips. Old Captain Freeman, the inspector for the Melbourne and Sydney Underwriters' Association, saw the *Pride* with her barge-consort come quiveringly and laboriously round the park

bend, and went home with a sudden and convenient fit of asthma. He knew perfectly well that his ancient comrade had topped up so from no motives of greed, but simply through a determination to carry out an undertaking. Otherwise, the trusty walking-stick with which he used to measure load-lines, and thereby protect the interests of insurers and consignees, would have been brought into requisition, and the *Pride's* certificate might have been in jeopardy.

Now, however, to everybody's surprise, the skipper "backed down." Evidently Captain Davies, with all his bluffness, could not bear to see a young and lovely woman in distress.

It is possible, that had the lady's veil dropped a couple of inches lower, or her words had been uttered in tones of rarer timbre, she might have been taken for an older woman. And in this contingency we would not like to say that the skipper's refusal already given would not have been confirmed.

As it was, he let go the wheel, and stepped out of the pilot-house on to the upper-deck. Touching his weather-stiffened felt not ungraciously, he called out—

"Weel, ma'am, if you must go I s'pose you must. Where's it to?"

McCulloch's clerk answered for the lady.

"To Melool wood-pile, Mr. Davies," he said.

"Melool wood-pile. Well, I'm——"

With what personal reflection the skipper closed his response cannot be told, for a loud burst of laughter from the wharf-loungers precluded its being heard. There wasn't a man within earshot of the brief colloquy we have reported that did not apprehend the situation as clearly as the *Pride's* master himself.

With flour £25 a ton, and potatoes £10 at Wentworth and £40 and £20 respectively at Wilcannia, with a river falling three inches every twelve hours, with a barge laden chiefly with his own flour and "spuds," with two seasons' back-block clips waiting river-transit, to have to lose an hour at the start and another hour *en route* for a beggarly £1 fare—well, the occasion would have justified an explosion of emphatic remarks from the mildest-tempered man that ever disturbed with a steam-whistle the echoes lingering in the Riverine forests. Had it been a passenger for Wentworth—fare £7 10*s.*—that would have been bad enough—but Melool!

Melool landing was on the crookedest, snaggiest part of the river, and from the *Pride's* time of starting could not be reached by the boat till

dusk of the following day. What with the actual loss of time and possible risk involved in making the landing, the captain would have willingly sacrificed a "fiver" to be off his bargain.

But while Skipper Davies was inwardly blessing his luck and cursing McCulloch's agent for "letting him in to this," and while the wharf-loafers were enjoying their laugh at his expense, the passenger for Melool landing—those who know the middle Murray need not be told the wood-pile juts over the station landing—had got aboard.

* * * * *

The men who "run" the wood-piles that furnish fuel during the seasons when the river navigation is open to the steamers trading on the Murray, Murrumbidgee, and Darling, widely though they may differ in their personal characteristics, have one striking bond of resemblance—they are lovers of solitude, or if not that, are haters of the "common haunts" of their fellow-creatures.

They lead the dullest of monotonous existences, the only excitement derivable being associated with the precariousness of their means of subsistence. When the river is "up" there is a fairly good time before the wood-cutters. When

they are "down" and non-navigable, which they generally are, the woodcutter's luck is down too —to the hardest bed-rock. Before the owner of a wood-pile there is none of that prospect of wealth which induces men to follow other solitary pursuits, to graze their cattle in untrodden wilds, and to penetrate with a prospecting-pick into remote and trackless mountain recesses. He can see ahead of him nothing but brief periods of moderate prosperity and hard work, alternating with far longer stages of harder work and the grimmest poverty. Only a man who is sick of society certainly, of life probably, would "run" a river wood-pile.

Such a man obviously was the stalwart fellow who, dressed in flannel shirt and dingy tweed, stood leaning against the mass of mixed "stringy" and box and red-gum which composed Melool wood-pile, as the *Pride of the Murray* turned into the snaggy reach leading to the landing. His bearded face was set in lines which seemed to speak of forty years' disappointment, and broken hopes and lost faiths; but otherwise his appearance was that of a man of thirty, of far from rude parentage. The delicacy of breeding was apparent in the nostrils and the angle of the face, and in the long wiry fingers that played with a

Collins axe which he held in his grasp. This he moved mechanically to and fro, catching on and then losing in its pendulum movement, a beam of the fast-dying sunlight.

He had heard the steamer's exhaust twenty minutes before; he had not come out of his tent, which stood against a sheltered and sheltering clump of timber a hundred yards from flood-mark, till her whistle had sounded. Dwellers on the banks learn to recognize, even at night, each boat passing up or down stream by her exhaust, and the peculiar symptoms of the *Pride's* high-pressure engines—a deep throbbing sigh, then two quick, short gasps, and then another long-drawn breath—told him at once that it was Davies' boat out on the river. He had never previously called during his ownership of the pile. Accordingly, till the whistle was blown he did not leave the tent. When it shrilled in his ears, startling plovers and ducks resting for the night, he knew he was wanted, and went down to the bank, speculating as he walked what business the *Pride* had up Melool Reach, and whether she would get out of it without smashing a float or two of her paddles. He was quite sure she would not want fuel, as she invariably wooded lower down stream.

As the boat advanced slowly, now stopping,

now going astern, as the rouseabout in the stern fathomed the channel with a pole, and now driving her nose up another channel, the watcher on the bank saw through the dim half-light a lady standing by the gangway. The mate, the veteran Dave Bowers, was beside her with a valise in his hand, and a deck-hand stood ready to run out the gang-plank.

"The deuce!" muttered the man by the pile. "A visitor for the station and no one to meet her! This means giving her up the tent, and camping out for the night. Pleasant!" Nevertheless, the prospect of a night's discomfort did not deter him from throwing down the axe and leaping to the incline that formed the landing. Old-time training flushed his veins once more with the craving to be of service, were it but for a moment, to a lady. As for the passenger, while the steamer was making a path between snags and over shallows, she had given no thought to the skill that was serving her. The gleam of the axe-blade had caught her eye at the entrance to the reach, and her instinct had told her that the hand that held the glittering object was that of the man she had come from the ends of the earth to seek. Her visit was not to the station but to the wood-pile.

The gangway of the boat breasted the landing-place, and the plank was propelled forward. The man on the bank extended it with his foot and at the same time stretched forth his hands.

He said, "You are for the station, madam, I presume. I must tell you that there is no one here to meet you, and you can't get to the homestead to-night."

His hand was clasped firmly. Still standing on the plank, careless of the curious observers of the scene, the lady with her free hand lifted her veil.

"Ned!" she said.

"My God, Bess!"

And Skipper Davies, and Mate Bowers, and the crew, who saw the meeting and heard the exclamations, wondered as the old *Pride* drew in her plank and trembled reluctantly through the perilous passage to broader water, what relation the lady passenger was to the owner of Melool wood-pile.

"So you have found me, Bess?" the man cried hoarsely after some minutes' silence. He added with a bitter satire burdening each syllable of his utterance — "I beg your pardon — Lady Erskine, I should say."

"Yes, Ned," the lady replied reproachfully; "and I am 'Bess' to you still and always."

He made no response, and she continued—"I have found you out; though the lawyers failed to find you. When they said they could do no more I took up the search myself—and I am here—never to leave you, if you will have it so, Ned."

The night had closed in rapidly. He had dropped her hand when she had stepped upon the bank, and had moved some paces away from her. But it was not so dark but what she could see him start and shudder at her words.

"I don't understand you," he said at last.

"You make it hard for me, Ned. Must I make it plainer? Must I say that I have come from England to—to—marry you—if you will have me for your wife?"

"Are you mad," he exclaimed, "or am I dreaming?"

"Neither; I mean what I say."

"And Dick, my cousin—what of him?"

"Your cousin—my late husband—is dead, died two years ago. For twelve months I have tracked you step by step to ask you, is the old love dead? When he lay dying he reminded me that social conventions and rules had separated you and me once, and told me not to let them keep us apart after he had gone. That was generous of him

at least. And, Ned," her voice lowered into the pleading accents of love—"I am here."

"My cousin dead!" he cried wonderingly. "Then I——"

"You are Lord Edward Erskine."

"I see it all," he said sardonically. "You threw me over once for his title, position, and wealth. And now that the position and, I suppose, the wealth, or some of it, are mine, you will throw his memory over for me! I fear, my lady, you have outraged convention in vain, after all!"

She burst into bitter sobs.

"You are cruelly unjust, Edward," she moaned; "you knew I married your cousin solely to gain his help for my father and to save him from ruin. As for the property and the money, they are left to me. And these I came to offer you with myself." And then, with a sudden burst into impetuous passion, she cried, "Ned, Ned, the old love cannot be dead; it cannot! Do not say it is; do not say I have sought you—and have humbled myself thus—in vain!"

"No," he answered, slowly and painfully. "No, Heaven knows it is not dead. But it is worse than dead—it is useless now. You are too late, Bess!"

"Too late?" she repeated.

He replied to her question by another.

"Do you remember, Bess, how we read *Locksley Hall* together years ago?"

"Yes," she replied.

"You said then you would have had a greater respect for the hero had he carried out his threat to 'mate with a dusky maiden' when he was jilted by his love. Well, I have done that. I have married—legally married, you understand—a half-caste girl from the Maloga Aboriginal Mission Station. Come, let me introduce you to my wife, the other Lady Erskine."

THE LAST OF THE *WOMBAT* BARGE

I

JIM KILLEN, the puntman, and his mate Tom had just swung back their pontoons after letting the old *Pride of the Murray* and her barges drop through from the wharf, when the exhaust of an incoming steamer was borne pantingly on the languid evening air. Jim put his hand to his ear to catch the sound more distinctly. Like most of the dwellers by the river-side he could distinguish the various boats by the tones of their escaping steam.

"It's the *Little Lizzie*," he growled to his assistant; "s'pose I'll have to let her through!"

"'Taint the *Lizzie*, Jim. It's Maltby's *Hero!*"

"Get alon' with you, you Sydney-side crow. Think I don't know every twist and turn of the little woman's steam-pipe? Listen there now—she's down by the Park, and she always speaks so when she's that far. 'Open the bridge, Jim!

open the bridge, Jim!' that's what she says, and none but a derned fool of a cornstalk what don't know a side-saddle from a stern-wheeler would say dif'rent."

"Lor', Jim, don't get shirty, old man," said Tom, who, being a Sydney-side native, was contemptuously regarded as a "colonial" by Killen (imported by Government at a cost of £20 3*s.* 4*d.* in the days of assisted immigration). "You know better 'n me, of course. But what are you goin' to do? You won't let her through to-night? It's after knock-off time!"

"W'en a cove as don't know a steamer from a barge wants to boss this bridge, I tells him to shut up straight. So now, Tom Hopwood, shut up. The *Little Lizzie's* a-goin' through if the skipper wants her!"

And though the dusk was fast settling down into the long, sweeping reach that was crossed by the bridge, and though the steam-whistle of the crane-engine had shrieked the knock-off signal full fifteen minutes before, Jim swung wide the crazy old pontoons into the muddy stream. They swayed on their hempen hinges sullenly and creakingly, as though, too, convinced that it was quite time to end their long day's work.

The men hauled in one rope, slacked the bight

of the other, and waited for the steamer. Tom had shirked his pull somewhat, and Jim knew it. But he heeded his mate's ill-temper as much as he did the mutual grinding of the pontoons, or the vexed beat of the river-ripples as they wrestled with the crumbling bank. If the *Lizzie* wanted to go through she should, and if she didn't, well, it didn't matter. So Jim, surly and precise always, and surly and precise in a double degree when it was a case of swinging the bridge after hours, resolved. Jim, like many a better and many a worse man, was, as he himself described it, "a bit weak on the womanines." That's what he used to say when accused of favouring the *Lizzie* by letting her pass the bridge at all sorts of unreasonable times and periods. But there was the *Victoria*, and the *Emily Jane*, and half-a-dozen other boats with feminine appellations, and the *Alice*, and he would never budge from the strict mark of duty and routine for them. And this circumstance—coupled with the fact that when flour was £70 a ton at Wilcannia and potatoes £15, and the great *Cumberoona* and the *Little Lizzie*, both loaded to the pilot-house with produce, were starting at the same moment for the drought-smitten Darling township, he had accidentally jammed a pontoon against the *Cumberoona's* starboard paddle (thereby

smashing the box and several floats)—had tended rather to discredit his partiality for the sex.

"It isn't the *Little Lizzie* Jim favours," said "Gus" Pierce, of the *Undaunted,* the satirist of the Riverine; "it's the *Lizzie's* mate!" Gus was right, though it scarcely needed his keen vision to have discerned as much. Any one with the proverbial half-an-eye could have perceived the true cause of Mr. Killen's willingness to oblige the *Lizzie.* Certainly no one who noticed how, on this September evening, the ruggedness of his face softened as the "mate" hailed him, could have failed to understand the motive for his favouritism. For, sure enough, it was the *Lizzie* and her consort, the *Wombat,* that with great animalish gaspings and pantings stemmed the strong river, and forged breathlessly round the willowy bend, through the pontoons, past the half-buried hull of Cadell's old *Lady Augusta,* to her berth under the wharf cranes.

"Thank you, Jim," shouted the mate from the pilot-house; "you're a good soul to let me through to-night. It's worth ten pounds to me." And a flattered smile ironed out the furrows in Jim's countenance as he waved his hand in acknowledgment of the words. High-pitched was the majestic voice, but there was a note of mournful

music in it which Jim, with his rude fancy, compared to a curlew's cry. No man's voice could claim that trill surely. The mate of the *Lizzie* was a woman.

II

There had been the very devil to pay on the rivers when Capt'n Kingsley—who, after running one season under McCulloch's flag and another under Whyte Counsel's—had, in the third year, purchased the *Little Lizzie* with her barge *Wombat*, and put his wife to the wheel. It was done as a joke at first, the mates and deck-hands thought, and they entered into the spirit of the freak. They cheered the little woman as she piloted the craft in and out of shoaling channels, by snaggy gullets, and over treacherous reefs. And they "put their money on her" and the *Lizzie*, when it came to racing the *Princess* or the stately *Cumberoona*, for what the more powerful boat gained in steaming, the little 'un more than won back by the deft way she was handled. And they worked with new vigour when wrought upon by the kindly criticism of her glance.

When, however, in the beginning of Capt'n

Kingsley's fourth river-season it was made apparent that he was shipping no mate, but that his pretty, youthful wife, a mere slip of a girl she was then, was going to take turn and turn with her husband, the skipper, there was open rebellion on the part of the *Lizzie's* crew, and the deadly antagonism, covert and overt, from the hands of other boats. Men whom the event directly concerned, men whom by the widest stretch of imagination it could not be conceived to concern, joined in the row. The whole river population—from Albury to Goolwa, from Wakool Junction to Wagga, and from Wentworth to Wilcannia—were in agitation. The mate whom Mrs. Kingsley had displaced had almost as much to say on the matter as Sooty Bill the loafer, who never had a wash except when he was thrown into the river in a squabble, and who never did an honest day's work out of gaol.

Unto Captain Richard Kingsley came Captain Freeman, inspector for the Melbourne Underwriters.

"You're frightened of the insurances, are you, Mr. Freeman?" politely inquired the former. "Now, my wife doesn't get drunk. And tell me how many down cargoes come to grief and a river's bottom through a drunken mate at the wheel."

Captain Freeman walked away.

Unto the captain came a deputation of the skippers.

"Lookee here, gentlemen," he said, "I've a little girl down in Melbourne. She can't live with us on the river in Echuca—the weather 'd kill her. My wife does a mate's duty, saves a mate's wages, and we keep that child where she has a chance for life. It's my wife's own wish, not mine, and as I haven't paid for this boat and barge yet, I don't intend to cross her."

Upon the heels of the skippers' deputation there came a number of deck-hands.

"Men," said Kingsley, "I'm skipper of my own boat!" They persisted. "Men," he said, "if you don't like my service, clear!"

And they did so. Not that they were afraid of trusting themselves to the "mate's" skill, but the idea of being bossed by a woman galled their manhood. And, as no other men would fill the revolters' billets, Kingsley filled up the vacancies with Chinese. He could not see that in enlisting nine or ten odorous Ah Fats, and Ah Leans, and Moy Sins on his wages sheet, he was placing the axe to the root of his life and his fortunes.

They served him and the "missie matie" admirably. Whatever the pagan was put regularly

to do he did with the unerring instinct of imitation, in which consists his intelligence. As deck-hand and rouseabout, as stoker, as cook and steward, as lumper of wood-bales on river-banks, cutter-up of firewood and stower of cargo, John was active and untiring. But when initiative and readiness of wit were required he was almost as miserable a failure as a "new chum," who berthed on a river-boat to earn tucker "till his remittances arrived."

Capt'n Dick stuck a sounding-pole in Ah Ling's hands one afternoon on an up-river trip.

"Ah Ling, you put stick in water, and when water comes to this mark you call—'By the mark —three. And to this mark—four, and to this mark—five, and to this mark—six. You savee?"

After half-an-hour's patient instruction, Ah Ling "saveed," and the skipper relieved his wife at the wheel. They were in a long, deep reach where the ten-foot pole should not touch bottom. Dick thought he'd test his pupil.

"Sound, Ah Ling!" shouted the captain. "Sound!"

With a coolness that indicated a mastery of his business, the Chow dropped in the pole and boldly sent forth the awe-inspiring cry of "By-y'-mark —Fwee!"

"Three! Heaven!" There was no shallow ridge or bottom thereabouts, but a great snag must have shifted into the boat's course — and the *Wombat* was down with produce seven feet! In a second the skipper had his wheel hard down, and the engine-room telegraph had been signalled "full speed astern," and the bargeman shriekingly ordered to "stop way." Dick recovered from the fear of seeing his crafts snagged in mid-stream just in time to hear Ah Ling repeat the last words of his lesson—"By-y'-mark—six"—and to hear his mate, Nell, who had rushed forward, laugh, with a laugh that was half a sob—"Go ahead, Dick, it's over the pole. This gaudy old parrot doesn't know any better!"

Another day Andy McBean, the *Lizzie's* engineer, and the only white man who had remained on board after the Chinese invasion, told his stoker, Sun Lee, to watch the steam-gauge, while he, Mac, made up, by a short nap, for the loss of sleep during the night when they had been running during the small hours.

"Water get down here, Sun," said Mac, pointing to a safe point on the tube, "you come and shake me."

Mac coiled himself in the shade of his wood-pile, and slept the sleep of the just man and the

tired engineer for a couple of hours. Then he was awakened by the hiss and the bite of scalding steam. Sun Lee had been relieved on the night-watch, but if his boss slept in the day-time why shouldn't he? So he allowed his silky eyelids to droop over the almond orifices through which his soul looked out on the world, and he too slumbered sweetly while the steamer plodded along the Twenty-mile Reach, and the water in the boiler evaporated, and the tell-tale in the gauge got lower and lower. Sun Lee and his brother heathens were nearer heaven at the moment Mac woke up than they were ever likely to be again, unless some other steamer's boiler blew up. "The closest shave I ever knew," breathed Andy to himself, as he flung open valves and cocks with trembling fingers, which did not lose their tremulousness until they had encircled Sun Lee's dreamy eyes with grimy rings of puffy flesh.

A close shave indeed! So close a shave that the skipper and mate henceforth had to do double duty because they could not trust any single pagan further than they could see him. For the mechanical routine which an educated donkey would have gone through with ease John was invaluable, but as to all else he wasn't worth his

ration of rice. Kingsley would have thrown the individual and collective Chinese overboard but for the "missie matie."

III

She stuck to the Chows when Kingsley's better judgment would have sent them adrift.

"Dick, there's Katie, and I don't like to be beaten, dear. I'll work double, but go back to the old plan I won't. I'll not confess we're beaten. We save forty pounds a month by having them aboard. That'll buy us a new barge next season. And, Dick how the rivers 'ud laugh at us having to own up we're wrong."

So six-foot Dick, with the broad shoulders and the bronzed face, was wheedled by his fatherly love, and his wife's cooing, and his skipper's pride into continuing a foolish policy. He was manly enough to face a crowd of drunken deck-hands when they rushed from the wharf-side on to the *Lizzie's* deck to avenge the insult to their class implied in the engagement of the Chinese; manly enough to face them and strong enough to thrash them. Nevertheless, his love and his pride made him weak, and he kept to his plan. He worked

double-tides himself; was skipper, deck-hand, mate, and bargeman in turns. And worked his wife, too, double-tides. The rougher work she could not, of course, manage, but her little hands grasped the wheel almost continually when steam was up. She would stand in the pilot-house for nine and ten-hour watches, clad in neat blue serge with bright brass buttons. Beat the sun ever so hotly, or blew the wind ever so blastingly, she kept her post. In her long spells of duty she learnt the river so well that no other mate possessed an equal knowledge. She knew all the landmarks and guiding points, and where the water shoaled, and where the current would lodge the snags. She threaded with delicacy of touch the boat's way under overhanging gums to dangerous landing-places, and up shallow channels to wood-piles, and when she was at the wheel, the boat seemed to steal from her something of womanly felicity of movement, and went in and out of the pinches and bends with a more graceful swaying of her stem and a softer beat of her paddles. By the close of Kingsley's fourth season, his mate Nell was the most accomplished steering hand, bar Bill Davies and Ted Barnes, on the three rivers. Even the river-men who hated Kingsley for his alliance with Celestials

admitted as much. When six steamers and nine barges were stuck up by the falling water at Campbell's Island, Kingsley's mate put the nose of the *Lizzie* right up the channel, and with swift nervous balancing of the wheel, drove her through devious cross-cuts and over treacherous spits of sand that masked ghastly snags beneath their glittering whiteness into deep water.

"D——d if she war't take the craft over wet grass nex'!" cried the *Riverina's* mate, Jim Morris, with an honest chord of admiration ringing in his rough voice.

And if you think anybody on the rivers desired greater praise than that, you don't know the Murray boating trade!

* * * * *

The close of the fourth season brought them, though Capt'n and Mate Kingsley knew it not, the beginning of the end. Fate had dealt out to them some first-class cards, but she had made the shuffle with her hand covered with a poisonous glove.

During the summer off-season when the rivers were down, and the boats laid up, the Kingsleys visited Melbourne to taste the rare joys of a sweet home life for a few months. After one happy day spent on the St. Kilda beach beneath

the ti-tree clumps, in and out of which the father and mother played hide-and-seek with their laughing child, the captain strolled into the baths. He rolled himself luxuriously in the pungent waves, as was his wont in the greenish Murrumbidgee after a warm day's work on Hay wharf, and showed the other bathers a trick or two of fancy swimming. But they looked strangely at him as he leapt out of the water, with a curious shrinking made visible in their glance. For upon his head, and limbs, and body, like miniature moons surrounded by rose-flushed halos, were white spots encircled by pinkish aureoles. All over him, from the broad forehead that he had held aloft as a frontlet of manly pride in the face of all men, to the curving ankle which it would have defied the skill of Phidias to mould in marble, the horrid blotches appeared.

He saw the things himself. As he gazed upon them, scarcely alarmed as yet, and with no dawning of the horrible truth glimmering its way into his brain, his strength went from him—the strength that had nurtured the copious hairiness of the massive chest whereon the spots clustered more closely—and he fell, a log, on the deck of the bathing platform. One only of the bathers drew near him—a young doctor. "Keep back

all!" the latter cried, and then ordered blankets to be brought. With careful touch he covered Kingsley up, and then, striving vainly to overcome a natural repugnance, whispered to the barely conscious man: "Where do you live?" Dick told him, muttering with a feeble discordance, and prayed: "What is—the matter with me?"

The doctor rose up, and motioned the staring bathers and attendants away. They obeyed the gesture—some who were half-attired gathering up their garments and dressing as they went. The doctor knelt again by Dick's side. "Are you a man?" he said. "Can you take—a blow?"

"Yes," answered Dick, "if you—don't hit—my wife—and child—as well."

"The blow will hit all you care for."

He paused, and the air was heavy with the respirations of the two men before he went on.

"You are a white leper—and a dead man."

IV

The old order of things partially resumed its sway on the steamer *Lizzie* and her consort, the barge *Wombat,* with the beginning of the Kings-

leys' fifth season. A white-man crew superseded the spawn of the lazar-house. But Jim Morris, late of the *Riverina,* was skipper, while Mate Nell retained her post. The rivers did not object to that arrangement when they were told that Capt'n Dick had been smitten by a mortal sickness and would never finger wheel-spokes again. Upon the news, the great heart of the river manhood gave one sharp, short beat of gladness, and then another of shame at itself, and then went on pulsing regularly in sympathy with the little woman.

The rivers did not know how awful was the doom that had overtaken their erstwhile enemy. Nebulous popular belief shaped itself at last into the notion that Dick's masterful brain was thrown out of gear by a sunstroke; and it was good for Mate Nell that nothing of the ghastly truth penetrated to the quick intelligence of the boatmen. Deck-hands would have fled the *Lizzie* as a thing accursed, and stevedores would have refused to handle freight. For the river-men would have concluded — and justly — that had Capt'n Dick kept himself from contact with the leprous brood the hideous canker would not have rotted his splendid virility. When a white man clutched poles, and ropes, and fenders after Chinese paws had slimed them over, what could

he expect but that some of the slime would stick?

That is what they would have said had they known. Fortunately, they knew next to nothing. Fate was so far merciful.

Only of all Riverina did Jim Killen, the puntman, know. A worthless son of Jim's had died in Wentworth Hospital while the *Lizzie* lay at the wharf at the junction township. Nell had nursed the scamp in his last hours with sisterly tenderness. Thereupon Jim had vowed that what he could do for the mate he would do.

"The mate, she loosed my Ned's warp-lines gently, an' he hadn't to let go with a thud," he had said when he spoke of the incident.

Up to the coming upon them of Kingsley's doom Killen had done no more than throw an occasional ten-pound note into the captain's way, by dropping the *Lizzie* through the pontoons after hours, so that the boat might have first chance with the disengaged crane. But in the hour of her extremity Mate Nell thought of the puntman. Dick craved to return to the river-side; he would live in a bark humpy or a tent, he said—anywhere, in anything, so long as it was in sight of a river, and within the sound of a

steamer's whistle and exhaust, and where he could sometimes see his wife. And Nell took the puntman into her confidence.

He helped her.

"So Capt'n Dick is goin' with the stream, is he?" he said. "I never liked that Chow bus'ness, but I'll help you for Ned's sake, Mrs. Kingsley. You let Ned's warps drop quietly into the current, ma'am, an' the Capt'n shan't go with a rush, if I can help it."

He built a rough humpy on a thickly-wooded twenty-acre block he had purchased on the Moama side, and there Dick was brought by night-stages from Melbourne. In the late autumn this happened, in the early winter the rivers were "up."

The season promised to be a long one. The Hay, Balranald, and Wentworth wharves still were burdened with back-block wool left over from last season. Every station on the river and out back was crying out for produce, and stores and sawn timber and the late wool would give return cargoes till the new clip was hurried down. These bright prospects made Dick desperate. He moaned in his gunyah tomb and fretted his heart away quicker than the scaly patches ate into his flesh. The next seven

months should have given him fortune, and instead he was being offered death!

Every sound of Nature or of man pained him with a sharper than physical pain. The steam-saws at Macintosh's mills on the opposite bank tore him with their teeth; and again and again he suffered the throes of dissolution as he pictured himself being crushed between the gigantic logs that fed their steel saws. That was all he was fit for—to throw himself beneath the logs. Other men could carve the timber into shiny, golden sovereigns, each of which would melt into some joy or buy some happiness—but for him, the only timber he needed was six pine planks for a shell!

Then the laughing-jackass would stop in his work of snake-hunting to cast a sneer at him from the crown of unstripped gums, and the young cicadæ would join the taunting chorus from the teeming grass. And he would deride himself for being their revengeful sport.

Then the rippling stream, on which he dared not look in the day-time save between the interstices of thick foliage, stung him with its jesting whispers. It asked him why he did not drag money from its bosom, and when he did not answer, itself answered for him. It flaunted an

iridescent bubble on its surface that momentarily mirrored his dreadful features.

So with everything. The monotone of the curlew was the wail of his despair; the steam-whistle spoke to him defiantly and dared him ever to disturb the forest glades with its shriek again; the fluff of the wattle showered upon him the jingle of the gold whose hue it had stolen. The distant hoarseness of the men as they called the soundings and the screech of plumaged parrots made him shiver, for they reminded him of Ah Ling—and he knew now the significance of the tiny spot on Ah Ling's neck! And the sky, whether it glared in brassy brilliancy or opened its storm-fountains, tortured him, for the one aspect told him that the hot sun would draw down the mountain-snows, and the other bade him reflect how the swollen tributaries would pour their wealth into the main streams and give the boats another month of activity, when every hour would be worth a yellow coin. Life mocked him at every turn.

So, in effect, he said on the slate, which, his sole means of communication with the living world in his wife's absence with the boat, he was accustomed to leave on the border of his woody prison; and Jim Killen, reading the chalked

words with laborious eyes, muttered, "He's a-goin' looney." And when, on the September night in which we saw Jim first, he waited at the head of the cutting after throwing the bridge across the stream for Mrs. Kingsley, in order to escort her through the darkness to the leper's home, he recalled the words so that he might break to her the frenzy of her husband.

"What news, Mr. Killen?" she said, shaking his hand.

"Bad, I'm afraid, ma'am. He's losing his lines in a way I don't like. He's a-goin' looney."

"Oh, God!" She could say no more, but fell trembling; a wattle that, shaken by the pressure, dropped a golden shower on her head.

"Oh, God! That is too much!"

"He put on the slate two days ago, as near as I can remember, these words—'I have cursed God, and yet He lets me live. The very snakes laugh at me when I want them to bite me. I took a tiger-snake to bed with me last night, and I am alive still. Say the word, Nell, and I shall kill myself. I won't do it till then because I promised you. But say the word, darling.'"

"Oh, Mr. Killen, oh, Jim, what shall I do?" wept Mate Nell.

Jim knit his brows painfully.

"You won't be vexed, ma'am?" he muttered at last.

"Vexed, Jim, my friend! How could I be vexed?"

"Well, I'd say the word, ma'am. It 'ud be most merciful to you, an' him, an' the little daughter!"

"Never, Jim, never! Better be a leper's wife than the widow of a suicide!"

"It'll be that in any case, ma'am. But if you won't say the word, you'll jest have to stop with him."

"He won't allow me!" moaned Mate Nell. "I did not want to start this season—I wished to stop with him. But he said we would be robbed if I did not go, and no one could watch the rivers as I would!"

To watch the rivers was necessary to play the game of speculation successfully. An exact calculation which would get a boat and barge loaded with produce down the "summer-level" Murray in time to meet the first freshets of the Murrumbidgee or Darling, might win a couple of thousand pounds, while an error of a few hours would entail the loss of hundreds. And it took the owner's eye always to note the fall and rise of the stream, so Dick thought.

They moved on—the man wondering how it was all going to end; the woman stupefied and as in a dream, the dilated pupils of her eyes alone showing that she was awake to the horror that awaited her.

V

The next down-stream trip from Echuca, Mate Nell was mate of the *Lizzie* no longer. She was "bargeman" of the *Lizzie's* barge, *Wombat*, and the old bargeman had taken her place on the steamer. And aft on the barge, in a newly-built compartment, went—a passenger.

Nell wouldn't say the word that would have released Dick from his fate, and he wouldn't let her remain with him. To leave him alone was to leave him to madness. So in the dead of the night, before the *Lizzie* next cleared the Customs for Hay, a tottering spectre, sheeted in greyish cloths, stole from out of the shadows down by the path through George Air's ship-yard on to the punt, and thence to the *Wombat's* cabin.

* * * * *

The men wondered at first that they had not

seen Capt'n Dick come aboard, but their delicacy forbade a syllable of surprise to reach the ears of Mate Nell. And then Killen dropped a word here and there in mysterious accents, how he had seen Capt'n Dick, "An' he'd take his oath Dick was a gone looney."

Down to Hay, and then to stations below for late wool; up to Echuca again; up to Tocumwal for a short timber trip, and back to the port once more to fill up with stores and wire for which the big 'Bidgee stations were ravenous, went the *Lizzie* and the *Wombat*. Another quick run would have followed with the first-clipping of the new wool, and back again to race the *Victoria* for the Burrabogie and Hunthawang clips. First come first to load, was the rule of the two crack stations, and their freight carried an extra pound per ton of "greasy," and thirty shillings for "washed," for balance of the *Lusitania's* cargo-room was booked for their wool, and, filled or not, the ocean freight would have to be paid. Up to Burrabogie, beating McCulloch's boat by half-a-day, and back to Hay, there to top up with Hunthawang bales, and thence home for Christmas. This was the plan.

Golden trips in golden weather, all these passages! Every hundred revolutions of the *Lizzie's*

paddles minted a sovereign as the leper calculated on his slate. If the water would hold up till January or February they could then sell the crafts, and, with the proceeds added to the season's earnings, bid the rivers farewell. They would seek thereafter some distant home—and wait calmly for the end! This was Capt'n Dick's notion, for once back on the rivers the swish of the floats as they carried the water, and the throbbings of the pistons, imparted something of their restless vigour to his enfeebled system, and thoughts were struck out of him as masterful and bold as in the old days.

"We shall have a happy Christmas after all, Nell," he wrote on his slate, and passed it through the partition to his wife's hands, just before they left Pollard's wharf, at Hay, on the last trip of the year.

"God grant it, dear!" she whispered as she went out to trim her barge.

The wharf-loungers cheered the little woman as the barge drew by, and wished her the best of good-luck, and the happiest of Christmases, and the speediest of recoveries to the old man. For a moment the cloud lifted, and against hope she hoped and believed their hearty wishes would come true. As Skipper Jim sounded the last

whistle, she turned and kissed her finger-tips to the throng. It became a tradition, that kiss. The glory of the river-trade has departed, but the memory of Mate Nell's farewell lingers yet in nooks and corners of the Riverine country.

For Hay never welcomed Mate Nell again.

* * * * *

The craft had reached Canoon when the river fell suddenly. That very morn the sun had risen fiery red, and as he ran his course he trailed behind him scorching blasts and steaming mists that wanted only a solitary spark to link the heavens to earth in a chain of flame.

And the spark fell!

In the great reach, fifteen miles below Canoon, Morris found he had to run a gauntlet of fire. Magnificent eucalypti bordered the sorrowing stream with spires of flame, and the tangled undergrowth spread the lurid contagion from clump to clump with an unquenchable rapidity. For miles in their front, miles on either side, and miles to their rear, the torrent of fire rolled on, roasting boat-hands with its heat, barring return with mammoth trunks that fell hissing into the stream, and threatening to stop their egress from the furnace with like impediments.

Every eye on the steamer was strained with a forward gaze, and none noticed that the piles of wool on the barge ignited. The bales had not been tarpaulined, and a fiery shower from a thicket of ti-trees had set the packs ablaze. Nell was the first to see the fire from the barge-bridge, where she held the wheel, and she cried for help.

Some of the steamer hands rushed to save her, but at the moment the *Wombat* reeled and shuddered as she struck bottom. Drawing two feet more than the steamer, she was aground.

Morris put full towage-way on the *Lizzie*. The paddles lashed the cindery current into foam, and the great shaft seemed as though it would burst from its bearings with its Titanic strokes. But this effort had the most fatal of results, for it severed the tow-rope. As a bird freed from a cage, the *Lizzie* sprang forward and left the *Wombat* aground and wrapt in her cerements of smoke and flame.

There was no returning. The shoaling water threatened the *Lizzie* with the same fate if she delayed her advance. Morris lingered until death had nearly completed his leaguer around him and his men also, and then, then, went on—leaving

Capt'n Dick and his Mate Nell on their funeral pyre.

Perhaps it was fancy, perhaps not, but Morris, looking back, thought he saw a woman's hand project itself from the smoke as if waving a kiss. "For little Kate," Morris whispered. "For little Kate!"

DICTIONARY NED

I

Emerson says somewhere that it is an achievement of high eloquence to confer an expressive nickname, but no particularly fine quality (oratorical or otherwise) was needed to attach a bye-name to Ned——

Ah—now I'm stuck! It has never dawned upon me till this moment, that in all the years I knew Ned to be spoken of I never heard his surname once. Perhaps none of the men who referred to him constantly as the biggest "cure" in that region of "cures" and "queer cards," the Riverine district—where each square mile has its tale of some human soul going to wreck on its sea of grey plain—knew his surname. Perhaps he hadn't one to know. Most likely, indeed, was this the case. His earliest recollection went back to the time when he was tending Parson Marsden's black poleys on the venerable Principal Chaplain's grant at Bathurst, so, as likely as not, Ned was

one of the hundreds of infants that were cradled in Parramatta factory, and were sent into the world worse than motherless, and with a choice among fifty fathers. All the same, I am sure none of the fellows who spoke of Ned to me knew his surname, else it must have slipped out sometimes. But it was always "Dictionary Ned."

Now I was saying that any one without the faintest touch of eloquence could have given Ned that name—would have conferred no other on him had the selection of a hundred appellations been offered. Even a Victorian shire-councillor, who is the least oratorical person in existence, would have called him "Dictionary Ned." The congruity of the term was so obvious that a blind man could have seen it.

The name had its origin in the fact that Ned always carried a dictionary—a wonderful sort of one. It was based "upon the labours of Johnson, Worcester, Webster," and Heaven knows how many more, "and incorporated the latest results of the most modern and scientific lexicographers." Further, it was illustrated by "one thousand superb engravings from drawings by the best artists" (I am quoting from the title-page), and as though that was not enough to furnish to the humble student, it supplied, at the forepart, an "Analy-

tical History of the Growth of the English Language" (in two pages), and in appendices a "Glossary of Scientific Terms, a Classical Encyclopædia, and a Collection of Proverbial Sayings and Phrases from all Languages." The whole of this overflowing repository of learning had been published at sixpence. And Ned paid ninepence for it on his solitary trip to Melbourne, at Cole's bookstall, in Paddy's Market, in Bourke Street, twenty-five years ago. Cole wasn't a millionaire then, and you couldn't buy books at English prices. You paid ninepence for a sixpenny publication, and fifteen-pence for a shilling one, and a half-crown, and sometimes three shillings, for a two-shilling volume. And Ned, paying ninepence, had therewith purchased a treasure of wealth untellable, of joys limitless, and all the glorious orbs in the firmament of culture swam into his ken when he pocketed the book.

Keats never extracted from Chapman's Homer, Landor from Shakespeare, Lindsay Gordon from Horace, Marcus Clarke from Balzac, one thousandth part of the delight Ned obtained from his dictionary. The only volume he ever possessed, to him it was a library, a literature, many-volumed life itself. Somehow or other, the intangible charm that the mere study of words as words, as

the fossils of human experience and emotions, has for many people, had entranced this illiterate wanderer whose home was always on the fringe of "settled country," who was never at ease except he was "inside," who got astray in a one-street township, and who was utterly lost in the solitudes of a great city. Amongst the thousand-and-one types of humanity that wandered over the Old Man and One Tree Plains, there was the man who had never turned in till he had read a chapter out of his Bible; there was the man who carried a shilling Shakespeare, and the one who kept his mind alive on Byron; there was the fellow who always kept a woman's photograph, and the one who nourished his soul amid deadening wastes by the crucifix dangling around his neck. The consolation that each and all derived from his and their several idols Ned drank in from his pocket dictionary.

He had bought it with the vain hope of making up the deficiencies of his early education. "Never too late to larn, boys," he would assure the scoffers. And though he was wise in the wondrous lore of the plains and rivers, "up to any dodge" in free-selection and station life, knew every trick of bush-craft and of river-craft, and overlanded cattle in the early gold days from Adelaide to Forest Creek,

and (earlier still) ship from Bathurst to the valley of the Wannon in far western "Port Phillip," and had held the wheel of the *Lady Augusta* when she ran up to Tocumwal months before Cadell made his first chart of the Murray, he esteemed his precious knowledge, out of which "smarter" men had coined small fortunes, to be worthless compared with "book-larnin'." At every interval of leisure, and during the times of work when the duty of the moment would not be impeded by "study," out would come his book. When other men smoked, or swopped yarns, or drank, Ned studied. There was nothing complex about his methods. He went straight at the business of mastering its contents.

Somewhere about forty years of age when he invested his ninepence, by the time he became bargeman of the *Royal Duke* barge—she was built in the epoch when ferocious "loyalty" dislocated a man's neck—as consort of the *Currency Lass* steamer, he was within a year or two of fifty. And unremitting in his pursuit of knowledge, with all sorts of difficulties he had mastered the dictionary so far as "V," the page that begins with "vital" and ends with "votive." Ten words a day for a minimum, and one hundred for a maximum—when he had a rare holiday he totted

up the hundred—he had got off by rote the words and their meanings. And this was without counting the Sundays. He had devoted those to the "Glossary" and to the "Proverbial Sayings and Phrases," and to the horrible combination of letters which the dictionary-compiler, on the authority of the most modern and scientific lexicographers, used to express the pronunciation of the foreign phrases. It was a gigantic task this last, and Ned had done well to devote his Sabbaths to it when he had no other occupation than to boil his white shirt for next Sunday. Mezzofanti himself would have felt the task of memorizing the phrases to be herculean, if he had also found it necessary to recollect the key to their pronunciation. Just think of the labour of getting off by heart not merely the interpretation, for instance, of *L'homme propose et Dieu dispose*, but the weird and mysterious conjunction of letters with which the latest modern and scientific lexicographer expressed the sound of the phrase—"lōm-prō-pōz-ā-dyoo-dis-pōz." But all these fearful and wonderful shibboleths were gradually being mastered by Ned—to an accent. He was a beggar to learn, was Ned. As he himself said—"He warn't no slouch at stickin' to it."

That was the curious thing about Ned. All

his grinding away at vocabularies never seemed to tinge by the faintest degree of refined colour his vigorous colloquialism. Perhaps, in some distant period, when he contemplated sitting under his own vine and fig-tree—the most errant knight of the Murrumbidgee plains has always a vision of some roof-tree o' his ain—he intended to employ his "dictionary words," but in the days of his scholarship he kept to the rude, energetic speech of his kind.

Nor was it clear why he hadn't begun "larning" before he reached middle age. Once he was interrogated upon the point, but the answer, though apparently at the time conclusive, does not appear a sufficient explanation now that we can look back.

II

It was in the following circumstance that the question was put to him, and the answer received. Ned was running shares in a fencing contract on Benduck at the 'Bidgee. Sunday came, and Ned, having washed and ironed the white shirt he had worn at intervals during the week, in readiness for the next Sunday, donned his other "b'iled rag" and the "moleskins," which he called his

"go-to-meetin's," though they never went there. His toilette operations were observed with keen interest by one of the fellows who had sundowned it to the men's hut the previous night in expectation of the plum-duff and tot of rum which Benduck, even more liberal than other stations, invariably gave to the Saturday to Monday "whalers." A man of middle height and naturally sturdy frame, already, while still young, he carried himself with the swagsman's stoop, and his watery eyes gave the lie to the story of natural or acquired refinement which the clear-cut features would have otherwise told. Dirty with the indescribable dirt of the man of position who is debased to a congenial gutter, College Bill revolted, as he lay on a sheepskin in the early sunshine, against Ned's sacrifice at the altar of cleanliness.

"Who's that toff?" he asked of the cook.

"'Im? W'y, that's Dic-shun-ery Ned! Never 'eard of 'im?"

"That Dictionary Ned! My word, I didn't know he went in for white shirt and collars! I'll have some fun with him, boys—just you come and watch!"

Now, College Bill was esteemed a bit of a humourist, or rather of a satirist. For a "Bishop Barker" he would compose a quatrain on any

subject—a person preferred—suggested by the man who tipped him the drink, and for a bottle of brandy he would write a fifty-line satire and recite it with becoming action. It was whispered among the bosses and "colonial experiencers" that he was a University prize-poem man, but that could hardly be so, for Bill's "Ode to Swipes," the shanty-keeper at One Tree, was quoted all over the Riverine for its originality and force, and since the first University was, there has never been a prize-poem that contained those qualities.

Being what he was, Bill always had a claque, and when he meandered his odorous carcass to the tank-side, where Ned was performing his toilette, he was followed by several others of the sundowning brotherhood, prepared in advance to applaud his satirical efforts at old Dictionary's expense. They were already in laughter by the time that they had covered half the distance between the hut and the tank, for Bill, as he walked, improvised—

> Devoted student! while other "whalers" slumber
> He studies hard, does Dictionary Ned!
> But still he's storing only useless lumber
> In the squash-pumpkin which he calls his head!

"You're Dictionary Ned, arn't you?" began

Bill as he approached. "I'm Bill—College Bill the boys call me. Shake!"

Ned turned at the remark. Perhaps it was the circumstance that his fingers were busy buttoning his collar—he had only the one collar—that prevented him accepting Bill's proffered hand. Anyhow, he did not take it; he simply nodded and said—

"Oh, yer Bill, are yer?—College Bill? I've hern o' yer!"

"Yes," responded Bill, not feeling quite so easy as he should, his reception was so chilling. "No doubt you have. Being brother students, y' know"—he paused to wink impressively at his admirers—"we ought to be acquainted!"

"Ye—es,—yer think so?" drawled Ned.

"Of course, men of culture are not too numerous on the river country."

"So?"

There was a titter, not quite at Ned's expense. Bill was annoyed at it, and grew truculent.

"Do you know, I think you should drop the 'Ned,' my friend."

"Yes?"

"You should style yourself 'Dick.' 'Dictionary Dick' would be not only alliterative, but would be more euphonious!"

The chorus of laughter again went up—now on Bill's side. Wasn't Bill rubbing it in! What jaw-breakers he could use!

Ned didn't reply, but drew his dictionary from his hip-pocket where he always carried it.

"Going to look up 'alliterative' and 'euphonious,' old chap?" Bill continued. "Now turn up 'H'—you'll find the first under 'A,' and 'euphonious' under 'E.'" And the rouseabouts and swagsmen grew merrier. Bill was getting on well with his chiacking of old Ned! Ned, however, was still silent.

"Ned," went on Bill, "the only two men I ever heard of were books in breeches were Macaulay and yourself. Macaulay was a beggar to talk, but you're a beggar to keep your mouth shut. Oh, and by the way, why didn't you take your schooling earlier?"

"I don't us*u*ally ring my clapper on'y when I've got some toon to play," now responded Ned. "That answers yer first remark. An', as ter the second, it's my turn ter ask questions. Yer can read French, *Mr.* Bill Boozer—I beg parding—I mean Mister College Bill?"

Over his drunkard's rosiness Bill's face showed a deeper red. And the audience rejoiced exceedingly.

"Who'd 'a thought that ol' Dicshunery war goin' ter take down College Bill?"

"Can yer read French, mister? I've hear say as how yer says as yer could. An' if yer can, jest rip out that for the present company!" He held out in one hand the dictionary open at the "Appendix of Foreign Phrases," and with his other forefinger pointed out the phrases which he wished interpreted. Bill stared, and the carmine of his dissoluteness and of his shame vanished together. Grey-green, like the salt-bush scrub near by, was his quivering face.

"Look y'ere, coves," went on Ned. "He's a college chap, an' can't tell yer what mau—mo, vais—va, su—soo, jet—ye means! Or is it that he's ashamed ter tell yer?" He paused, and there were muttered requests from the audience to Bill to respond to the challenge and "take up the parable." But he was dumb.

"As he can't, or won't, coves, I'll tell yer. 'Mo-va-soo-jay,' that's a 'bad subject,' the dic-'shinary ses, an' a bad subject is a no-good-sort-o'-chap, a reg'lar bad egg, a rotten spud; an' who's that I should like ter know? Ain't that Bill's picter—ain't that the spit o' the chap as comes down 'ere to chiack me, the poor ignorant roust-about as is tryin' ter make up the loss o' what he

never 'ad, an' him what chiacks me 'as 'ad it all the time? An' what's he done wi' it now he's 'ad it? Used it, ain't he, ter lower hisself ter the swine as is in the styes—don't he act as decoy-duck ter get shearers to ev'ry knock-'em-down shanty in the Rivereena? He's used his larnin', ain't he, ter prove that Gawd Almighty don't know His own bizness?" He had closed his precious book as the speech lengthened, and, with his final words, raised his right hand as though in defiance of the Supreme Wisdom.

"What do you mean, Dicshinnery?" said one of the group.

"What do I mean? Here Gawd gives that boozer, that cove what'll sell his larnin' for a ball —I forgot as yer fellows call it a shout now-a-days —and his soul for a bottle o' the stuff; Gawd, I say, gives him—him, the swine—'Varsity eddication, an' me, an' some o' yer as well, who thirsts for it, and hungers for it, why, He don't give us our A B C!"

Bill quailed beneath the artillery of scorn that all eyes now levelled upon him, and walked away. In that brief space he had lost a nickname, and gained a choice of two others. He was no longer College Bill, but ever after, according to his com-

pany, "God Almighty's mistake,"[1] and "mo-va-soo-jay." More French was spoken in Riverina in consequence of this episode than was taught in its schools. And the teacher was simple "Dictionary Ned," and the manual his ninepenny compilation of the lexicographers' labours.

III

A man's hobby is oftentimes his death as well as his delight. This was Ned's case.

The great spurt of pastoral enterprise in South Riverina, which occurred in the late sixties, operated advantageously upon Ned, as it did upon every one else except the shepherds, who found themselves being gradually replaced by "Rylands" and "Whitecross," and the old-style squatter who wouldn't move with the times, and who consequently got "shifted" into back-country and Queer-street in one and the same impulse. Ned,

[1] "Gawd Almighty's Mistake."—Words substantially the same as in the text were addressed by the original of "Dictionary Ned" to a drunken ex-University man, who was waiting on the verandah of the Bridge Hotel, Echuca, for an opportunity to cadge a shilling from a party of English tourists, among whom was the present Sir Charles Dilke.

when the spurt set in, gave up rouseabout and odd-job work, and took finally to the rivers. One short season as deck-hand proved his trustworthiness, and the next season he was promoted to bargeman. Ten pounds three and fourpence per month, live like a fighting-cock—there never was a boat on the rivers which kept its hands on skimpy allowance, save one—and the best chance, if he wished it, to ullage the cargo: this was his billet. Too honest, however, to ullage, accustomed to live too sparely to revel in luxury, Ned seemingly put his increased screw to no better purpose than the re-binding of his dictionary.

The cloth cover of the treasured volume had become dilapidated, and one day when the *Currency Lass* was moored at Echuca Wharf, he took advantage of a "smoke-oh!" spell to run up to the *Riverine Herald* Office, then managed by Johnny D—— for Angus Mackay, of Bendigo.

"Yer can get this re-bound for me, Johnny—fine now, an' gilt edges."

"I'll send it to Melbourne," said Johnny, gingerly turning over the greasy, thumb-marked pages, "to Detmold. But don't you think, Ned, it's time you had a new copy?"

"A new copy?" echoed Ned. "It's easy ter see as yer not a readin' man, Mr. D——, for all

yer run a noospaper. If yer were, ye'd know as a book a lone man 'as used for the matter of ten years, is mother, an' missus, an' kids, an' drink, an' all ter him! A new copy! Blazes!"

And so the old book, round which the tendrils of Ned's heart had grown, went down to Detmold, the famed Melbourne binder, to be dressed in delicately-perfumed leather, with flexible sides, and richly-tooled bands, and gloriously-gilt edges, and all the rest of the finery so delightful to the book-lover's mind and so ruinous to his purse.

During the month following Ned felt all the distractions and all the sorrows that spring from a gap made in one's life when his hobby-horse is stolen from him. No man gets half the pleasure out of his business that he does out of his hobby, and he bears, therefore, the loss of his business better than he does that of the avocation of his leisure. And Ned was disconsolate, and would not be comforted—"moped," as his mate said, "like a native companion, and sorrowed as Jim Dickson, of the *Cumberoona*, didn't when he became a widder-man." It was a standing joke on the rivers how Dickson had sorrowed when the news of his wife's death reached him from Sydney. He was at Hay, and he hired the galvanized-iron Temperance Hall for a dance that same night.

"I've got to dissipate my grief, ladies and gents!" he said to his guests. And if the depth of his sadness is to be gauged by the extent of his dissipation, he was pre-eminent in grief among men. Ned, however, didn't drown his sorrow in Lindsay's beer, he simply moped.

But as the time drew near when he might expect the book, he brightened up. The *Currency Lass*, with her somewhat disreputable consort, the *Royal Duke*, was coming down stream from Burrabogie station to top up at Hay with back-block clip, when just in the narrow bend opposite the town cemetery, the crafts met the *Resolution* and barge laboriously steaming with timber and wire for the up-river runs. The warning signals were exchanged, and the steamers were slowed down. It was an awkward place to meet in. It takes careful steering enough to allow for the tangential force of the current in a sharp bend in carrying a steamer round the curves; it is trebly difficult when it is a question of getting a barge round as well; but the task becomes formidable when the surge and sweep of the current is complicated with the rule of the road and two not too smartly handled boats going in the opposite direction. Still all would have gone well if it had not been for the dictionary.

Linton, skipper of the *Resolution*, was at her wheel. On recognizing the *Currency Lass* ahead, he had sent down to his cabin for a parcel which had been entrusted to his care, and when he saw Ned, as he expected, at the wheel of the *Lass's* barge, he hailed him, and brought the *Resolution's* stern a point nearer to the slowly-moving *Royal Duke*.

"Ned, there! Diction-ary Ned!"

"Aye, aye, Mr. Linton!"

"'Specting anything, Ned?"

All Ned's desolation and expectation went out in his eager tones.

"Yes, skipper! My book—'ave yer got it?" In his excitement he had forgotten his usual cautious devotion to the work in hand. Instead of keeping his barge's head inshore, he steadied it mechanically.

"Yes," shouted Linton in reply. "Johnny D—— said you'd growl like h—— if it was knocked about in the mail, and as I was first boat he asked me to bring it. Here you are!"

Holding his wheel with his left hand, he drew with his right the carefully-wrapped package from the seat of the pilot-house, and swung his arm so as to gain impetus for the throw.

"Ready, Ned!" he called. "Look out!" He did not notice that in the movement he had

shifted the *Resolution's* course dangerously near the *Royal Duke*. Nor did Ned, fearful the book might fall in mid-stream, perceive his duty. He shouted to Linton—

"Hold hard, skipper!" and ran along the wheel-platform so that the toss would be an easy one.

On river barges the wheel-stand is shifted with the disposition of the cargo—now for'ard, now aft; now raised, now lowered. On long trips it is geared; on short ones held in position simply by its own weight and the rudder-chains. Now, from Burrabogie to Hay was but a few hours' trip, and as the top bales would have to be bestowed at the township wharf, the platform of the *Duke* was not stayed. Running to its flat end to get his precious book, Ned forgot this. When he remembered it, he was between the sheathing of the *Duke* and the steamer—jammed! A crunch, a shriek, and a horrid splash!

In their beginnings all catastrophes are so simple—are so easily preventible if the initial blunder in the man or the weakness in the thing could only be understood to be the beginning of disaster. The gearing of that wheel-platform to the vessel's sides—and it would not have slipped under Ned's rush to port! A turn of her wheel

and the *Resolution* would have stood up-stream ten feet away from the barge. But the platform of bolted planks was not stayed down, Linton's hand failed to send the gaily-painted spokes revolving, and the result was that poor old "Dictionary" was done for. It was not a very heroic way of dying, perhaps—and for the sake of a ninepenny book, too. But then the book was Ned's hobby, and men go to the death, do they not, all the world over for their hobbies. A king is but a hobby, a woman another, and Ned's hobby had never deceived him—and never smitten him with the despair of broken faith! And of what king or woman can that be said?

IV

He lingered for a few days, sometimes partly conscious, sometimes delirious—oftener still pathetically dead to sound, almost to sight. But about ten hours before his death—he "went inside" at sundown one Sunday—he revived to a calm clearness of brain. Among the watchers—there were as many as the hospital surgeon would permit—was one whom Ned was vainly trying to

recognize. And the man saw the glance and understood.

"Don't you know me, 'Dictionary'? I'm Bill—College Bill! The fellow you gave it to so hotly on Benduck three or four years ago—don't you remember?"

A flicker of a surprised smile shone on Ned's face, whose tan was changing to pallor.

"Yer—Bill?" he whispered. "Yer've a col-lar?"

A change indeed had come over Bill's appearance. He wore not a collar alone, but a "b'iled shirt," and—heresy!—studs, and his suit of cast-'em-aways was replaced by Geelong-tweed slops.

"Yes, I'm Bill! I pulled up, Ned, soon after you let me have it. I went on one big spree and then gave the drink best. I tried my best to get out of the styes, Ned. And you helped me."

"Ye-es? W'ere are yer—now?"

"At Pimpampa, teaching the super's kids! I'm putting my education to some purpose, Ned, at last!"

There was a silence, broken by Ned.

"Now, Bill—Mister Bill—on yer oath ter a dyin' man! D'yer mean ter keep straight?"

"Before God I do, Ned!"

"Where's my dic'shun-ery?"

This was the first time he had asked for it. The surgeon gave it to him, in its luxurious garb of Russian leather, with graceful scrolls of gilt lines relieving the dark brown. He took it, but it slipped through his nerveless fingers to the counterpane. He gazed on it curiously.

"Ter think as I can't hold the ol' book!" he whispered. "Bill, page 1-4-7, please!"

Bill turned up the page. Against one word was pencilled a cross.

"See that?" He pointed to the cross.

Bill nodded.

"Read it—slow!"

"In-cin-er-ate—to burn to ashes."

"I've a few hund'erd—ev'rybody listen, please—in Boyd's Bank.[1] They're yours, Bill——"

"No, no!" exclaimed Bill.

"Wait! What do folks do with their corpsuses—when they don't want ter be buried?" Strange how strong his voice grew!

"Order their bodies to be given to the hospital!" said the surgeon, with an eye to business.

[1] "Boyd's Bank."—The Bank of Victoria, of Echuca, was in the seventies under the management of Mr. A. B. Boyd, now of the Union Bank, Sydney, and was generally spoken of by the name of "Boyd's Bank." It was a popular notion among the river-men that Boyd owned the bank—and the rivers.

"Cremate them?" suggested Bill, thinking of "incinerate."

"That's the word! Lor,' what a thing it is to have larnin', Bill! But the word ain't in any dic'shunery, an' that chap there"—pointing to the marked word—"was nearest I could find!"

"You wish to be cremated?" said the surgeon, still professionally alert.

"Yes—cre—cre—oh, dash it, I don't see what they want ter use words not in the dic'shunery for. In-cin-er-ate—that's my ticket."

"And the expenses will be defrayed by the money in the bank! Hadn't you better sign a will?" Still the surgeon.

"Hang a will! Bill's ter have all the spons—yer all witness—after he's burnt me. Boyd 'll fix it!" And he mumbled on and on into slumber—and at sundown he went "beyond the boundary."

* * * * *

Boyd did fix it—very irregularly, and to the detriment of the Curator of Intestate Estates' commission—as soon as he was satisfied that Bill's claim was bonâ-fide. And it is gratifying to know that Ned's few hundreds planted his legatee's feet firmly on the upward path. Bill has suffered in all these years only one relapse from decent behaviour. That was when, in '77,

he stood for Parliament. But by that time he had won popular respect, and people thought too much of him to give him his way. They rejected him, and he is still, therefore, an honoured member of the community and unqualified for gaol.

And as to the manner of the incineration of Bargeman Ned and his dictionary—why, that is a tale for another time.

THE INCINERATION OF DICTIONARY NED

It is a traditional belief with the sturdy people of the Riverine district that theirs was always "an honest man's country"—that in the elasticity of its atmosphere men of the shady sort could not breathe, and their methods would not work. Like many other good old beliefs this particular one had no warrant in fact. What with smuggling and "the rebate system" on the rivers and dummying and "peacocking" on land, I do not think, area for area, a region can be found in Australia where the device that is dubious and the dodge that is dark grew to such luxuriance. Once upon a time of very long ago, that was, of course. At the present day, it is unnecessary to state, the men of the Riverine are as guileless "as they make 'em." The breath of the plains and the rivers is now an exhalation of innocence —of a surety. Such a dodge as is herein related would be of impossible happening now.

The generation of settlers of which the parentage was in the Robertson Land Act was, in truth, a very sad one. Morally speaking, I mean. As far as spirits and tempers went it was jovial and companionable, but the admirable comradeship which, on the surface, marked the country, hid feuds, and hatreds, and duplicities that were so far from admirable as to be detestable. Sometimes the disguise was thrown aside, and "the fine free-handed squatter" showed his teeth clenched menacingly, or the "enterprising selector" forgot his manners and threatened and boasted that he and his class would pick the eyes out of every run in the district, and the heart out of every run-holder. Sometimes the one was in fault, and sometimes the other; oftenest, both were in error. And thus, whether the Riverine sky smiled with exquisite delicacy of blue tint, or frowned with occasional sullenness, or glared brassily, the men who worked and schemed beneath it were driven by the folly and iniquity of the politicians to range themselves in one of two opposing armies, and to spend their energies in cutting one another's throats, instead of combining in the eminently useful work of cutting the throats of the legislators.

It was nothing but natural that some persons

and things quite innocent of partisanship should get mixed up involuntarily with these class-battles and animosities; bankers, tradesmen, and clergymen with every wish to remain independent of both sides became entangled with one or the other, or both. So, too, the boat-owner, who earned big lump freights from the squatter for wool and stores, but who also made big profits on his own tradings with the selectors and tradesmen. Even the Government officials took sides.

But of all the men, and things, and institutions that, having no immediate relation to the adversaries in the great battle of Free Selection versus Squatterdom, yet became involved with the fortunes of the fray, the most singular item was the corpse of Dictionary Ned. And the story of the way it did so is also an illustration of the lack of honour in the achievement of one's ends which widely characterized the Riverine men of the period. The trick by which Ned's corpse enabled the race between the *Currency Lass* and the *Pride of the Darling* to be won by the former was, in one aspect, justifiable. But certainly, in several others, the reverse. And this is the case where the predominant qualities give the tone to the whole proceeding.

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Dictionary Ned, dying in Hay Hospital, had desired with his latest words to be cremated, or as he termed it "incinerated." "Cremate" or "cremation" were not in his dictionary; "incinerate" and "incineration" were. In this epoch of the early seventies, when the disposal of the dead by burning was mooted, the latter terms were as often used as the former, but both expressions were as novelties, and the thing expressed was more novel still. Accordingly, when poor old Dictionary had "gone inside," the *Riverine Grazier*, of Hay, and the *Riverine Herald*, of Echuca, each put forth a claim for the honour and distinction of burning Ned. Also—for the profit.

Ned was known on the rivers—well and favourably known—and nobody in the flush times of the Riverine thought anything of travelling one hundred miles to do respect to a dead acquaintance. In ordinary circumstances Ned would have had a glorious funeral, and the local publican a rousing time, but when his obsequies were to comprise no ordinary hearse and ostrich-feather business, but the genuine novelty of a cremation, there was every reason to look for an inrush of visitors, intense grief, and deep drinking. Consequently, each of the patriotic and bibulous

editors of the two influential papers named, demanded that Ned should be finally disposed of "in his own important and leading centre."

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Echuca won the point—not, it is to be suspected, by any superiority of logic on the part of its editor, or of body in its local brew, but owing to the fact that Boyd, the Echuca bank manager, had possession of Ned's funds. He wired Mr. Grundy, forwarding agent at Hay, to "send Ned along by first boat. Dispose of him here." Mr. Boyd's word in this particular case was law. It was often law in others, too—and deuced expensive law at that.

Ned, you may remember, was bargeman on the *Royal Duke*, the barge of the *Currency Lass* steamer. And as the *Lass* and the *Duke* were topping up with back clips at Pollard's Wharf at the time Boyd's wire came to hand, it was the easiest thing in the world to slip Ned in his coffin aboard the craft to which he had been attached. As they dropped down into the mid-stream the hands from the other boats in port joined the loafers and lumpers on the wharves and cheered. Every person of standing above the average departing by coach or steamer, was sped by a cheer from the Hay people at that time. A

prisoner going to Deniliquin to be tried and hanged, and the judge who would sentence him, a newly-married couple, or, as now, a corpse—it was all one to Hay. How the cheers would spring forth—and the throats would get dry and dusty and be washed out. Disappointed as Hay was at losing the chance of seeing curious, prosaic old Ned transformed by fire into a poetic white salt, it would not refuse him the farewell, as he lay in his shell under the tarpaulin aft in the barge. The sight of that elongated object was touching—and a splendid excuse for drink. Hay folk always disliked drinking for its own sake. They appreciated an excuse.

Between Hay and Nap-Nap the trip of the *Lass* and her barge was uneventful. Somehow, every one on board had expected something to happen. It was no unusual thing to pick up a coffin at a wayside landing for transport to the nearest township or to Melbourne, but there was, when the crew came to think about it, something eerie and peculiar in carrying a stiff'un to be burnt. And the river men were almost as superstitious as sailors.

Without the same reason for hating to have a parson on board that Jack at sea has, a boat-hand grew morose when a white-choker was seen among

the passengers; though there was no albatross to daunt him as it poised itself on a magnificent length of tremulous pinion, to entrance him with malign glance, there were land-birds which infected him with their mystery; and if the mermaid did not spring from the water to lure him to ruin, still the yellow wave was alive with weird creatures, whose murmurs could be heard in the still night when the boats were tied up, and the moonlight splintered through the gums and acacias on the banks. And so the nervous system of the *Lass's* crew was shaken severely by the knowledge of their defunct passenger's destination.

"'Tis a-temptin' the Arl-maäghty, that it be," said Cornish Jim, the Methodist fireman, who would sing Wesley's hymns in a sweet tenor in the intervals of blasphemy. "I do b'lieve as they maäght ha' wa'ted a bit, and so he be warnted to be buirnt, don't ee' think? 'Twarn't as if Satan 'udn't do it arl in good time!" And Jim spoke in all seriousness the sentiments of all. Nevertheless, M'Farlane's, Nap-Nap, was reached without incident. At M'Farlane's the *Lass* found the *Pride of the Darling* taking in wool and passengers. Though owned by different men, they were twin boats from the same yard, built on the same model, with equal engine-power, but, owing to the *Pride*

having been generally worked on the Darling, while the *Lass* was a Murray and Murrumbidgee boat, they had never been matched in a trial of speed. And it was a problem on the rivers which was the better boat. The general impression was that they were much of a muchness, and that any test of superiority would really be decided by their skippers.

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The *Currency Lass* was commanded by Ted Gowan—one of the early-time chaps who had risen from the position of an ordinary deck-hand, while the *Pride* was skippered by one of the big firm's newer importations. Forrester was a decent fellow enough, and ready to adjust himself to the river conditions. He was, however, like so many new chums, too much disposed to toady to mere wealth, and "the big-frontage man" was to him an object of veneration, quite irrespective of the consideration as to whether the fellow he made much of was anything more than the nominee of a bank, or was in the least degree admirable regarded merely as a man. Consequently, he was "just the sort" to tumble into all sorts of pitfalls on the rivers in an epoch of transition. In the disputes between squatters and selectors he could not help taking sides, while grim old-stagers like

Davies, and Dorward, and Lewin steered right ahead, and let the troubled waters close up after them as best they could.

As the *Lass* steamed by the Nap-Nap landing, she was gladly hailed by Dick Pillar, mate of the *Pride,* who was hungry for a tussle.

"Hello, the *Lass*! In a hurry, Ted?" he called. "Can't yer wait for us at the town, and we'll race yer up to 'Chuca?"

"How long 'll yer be, Dick?" Gowan said, as he slowed down. "I'll go slow if yer won't be long!"

"We've another score of bales, an' the fadges to stow, an' then to trim her. We'll be arter yer in a hour!"

"Right you are then. I'll wait at Cramsie's an' fix up terms. I'm on for a skim if your skipper is!"

And then Dick bethought himself. Perhaps the new chum cove wouldn't be willing to give up command to him, Dick, as it was essential he should for a race on equal conditions. To pit Forrester against Gowan was to lose the race before the start. Gowan could wriggle his boat and barge across "wet grass" without the thrilling of a nerve, but Forrester was desperately afraid of the shifting stream and its mysteriously changing

currents and snags and sandpits. Would Forrester consent?

Dick put the question before his skipper. He urged how the rivers had always wanted a fair heel-and-toe race between the sister craft, and here was a quite unusual chance to oblige 'em—loading about the same—next to no passengers to kick up a fuss when the pressure-gauge was getting suspiciously high—fair weather—and the race would be over before the bosses (owners) would know anything about it. The bosses did not object to racing *per se*, but they had, in view of the risk thereto attaching, a repugnance to rapid night-runs, and it was, of course, a prime condition of a contest that there should be no stoppages.

Forrester was dubious. He was not certain, he said, how the bosses would take the thing at all, win or lose. And he hinted—he did not say—that Gowan knew the stream ever so much better than he did.

"Oh, the bosses won't say nothin' when it's all over!" urged Dick. "It's the knowin' of it in advance they can't get over, for it shakes up the insurance people a bit. An' as to runnin', why, sir, I'll stick at the wheel till I drop jest to have a show of puttin' ol' Ted Gowan down."

Forrester was aft when Pillar had approached

him, talking to a passenger just come on board from the station homestead. This man, the Hon. Samuel Darke, M.L.C. (Victoria), was a well-known figure in every spot familiar to Riverine men. Half Irish, half Scotch, he was as tall as one of the first breed of Hawkesbury cornstalks, and strong with the strength of the brute. His intelligence, though it smacked of the brute too, as it was more cunning and instinct than reason, had carried him upward from the duffing-yard of the Manaro gully-raker to the proud position of a frontage shark in Riverina, who was spoken of with admiration at Scott's in Melbourne, and Esplin's in Hay, and Petty's in Sydney. Why the heavy jowl, the eyes that wouldn't look straight, the coarse ridge of fleshy nose, and the overhanging brow had not hanged him before the "gully-raker" had merged into the "honest squatter" and influential legislator, suggested questions as to the peccability in the way of bribes of the rural police. He was one of the chieftains of the moneyed host, who had sworn by the altars to beat and bounce the "cockie" out of Riverina, and was altogether so great a man that the British-born soul of Captain Forrester worshipped him immensely. Was he not the favoured of the principal of Britishers' gods, Success?

Now, Darke had overheard Dick's appeal to his skipper, and, conscious of his supremacy, interfered unasked.

"No——racin' while I'm aboard, skipper! Ye don't come that game wi' me!"

"No, oh no, of course not, sir," and Forrester, forgetting that he was no longer an apprentice in an ocean-liner addressing his omnipotent captain, touched his cap.

"An' I'm d—d if I don't get the marks of that other fellow's wool! If he carries clips of any of my friends I'll take care he get's a fine rap over the knuckles!"

"Yes, sir—just so—Mr. Darke! That's what I feel, sir. 'Tisn't fair to consignors to run risks!" Then, turning to Pillar, he said—

"No, mate! Can't think of racing!" So Dick retired for'ard.

As he passed the engine-room he spoke disgustedly to the engineer.

"My colonial oath! Hanged if I don't start a blooming subscription to buy th' old man a soot of plush an' false calves."

"What's he been a-doin' of, Dick?"

"A-touchin' of his cap to that——Darke!"

"Wot's th' rivers a-comin' to when a full-blown skipper does th' flunkey to an old cattle-

duffer? Th' rivers is a-goin' to the devil, an' no mistake."

* * * * *

This was at Nap-Nap landing. When, however, the *Pride* had covered the thirty miles or so to Balranald, an alteration in the resolution of her skipper and passenger was effected with unexpected ease. A company of young fellows from the Heytesbury country, in Western Victoria, had just selected on Canally and neighbouring stations, and some of their number were on their way to Echuca to shift down their stores and waggons. They had booked as deck-passengers by the *Lass*, and were all impatience for the arrival of the other boat in order that the race might be entered upon.

Gowan, whose craft's steam was up, wood in, and passengers aboard, sprang from Cramsie's stage to the *Pride's* deck, as the latter slowed in to take up a lot of hides.

"Well, Forrester," he said, "what d' you say? Are you on to make a match of it? First through 'Chuca punt—losers to give winners a spread at Jimmy Iron's?"

"No!" said Forrester shortly, "I'm not on!"

"Phew, you're not, ain't you? What the dickens did you mean then by putting Dick

Pillar up to ask me? Have you grown funky on it?"

"No, I haven't. But business is business—and our owners don't pay us to run races and risks at the same time!"

"Our owners! Speak for your own, my boy," retorted Gowan nettled. "I'll speak for mine, who trusts to my judgment and doesn't keep me in leading-strings like some other coves have got their skippers!"

Then he turned to go. As he did so he caught sight of the Hon. Sam Darke.

"Good-day, Mr. Darke. 'Ope yer well! I want Forrester here ter race us ter 'Chuca, but he isn't game."

"I'll take care he ain't game," said the M.L.C., with characteristic coarseness of tone.

"Well," rejoined Gowan, annoyed, "my passengers, though they're only selectors, ain't afraid of a bit of a flutter."

"Oh, oh, you're carryin' some of those—— blackmailin' beauties, are you?"

"I don't know nothin' about blackmailin,' an' as they ain't M.P.'s on the land racket I don't think as they does, either!" shouted Gowan, as he was crossing the gang-plank.

"D—n you! I'll make you pay for that sooner

or later!" exclaimed Darke, furious, as all his class were, at the insinuations referring to their well-known land-sharking methods.

"Oh, keep your hair on, Mr. Darke!" replied Gowan; "an' if yer want to make me pay, back that bloomin' *Pride* in a match with me to 'Chuca, an' she's bound to win, y' know, when she's you aboard. You bring good luck wherever you go, don't ye—'specially to the cockies an' dummy crowds!"

Darke, irritated at these words, discovered a perception of a way in which he could take down this impertinent skipper. He turned to Forrester, whose notions of propriety were being grievously shocked by the language of his brother skipper, and said—"Forrester, are yer in racin' trim?"

"Well—yes—sir, if you really wish it."

Darke, without answering, called to Gowan, "Look 'ere, you cheeky dog, if your —— blackmailers 'll back you to a 'underd, money down, I lay two to one on th' *Pride!*"

And while his challenge was exciting a sensation among the passengers and crew of the other boat he chuckled himself into good-humour by the consideration that "he'd got 'em there. He'd risk two 'underd with pleasure, seein' as 'ow the loss of a 'underd would break the ——" This was

an occasion when his old-time bullockese was of distinct value as a mode of expression.

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After a hasty conference the challenge was accepted by the *Currency Lass* party. While the crews of both boats eagerly wooded up for the fray, so as to avoid needless stoppages, a stake-holder was appointed. A colonial experiencer, returning full up of his experience to Melbourne, *en route* for his mother's Kensington drawing-room, offered his services, but was treated with scorn by both parties. They applied to him with unnecessary indelicacy of phrase the old query—"Who shall guard the guardians?" Peter Campbell, bush missionary, also on his way to Melbourne for a mild dissipation after a fairly successful journey among the Edward and Wakool stations, was also repudiated. Peter was well known, and "they didn't like to throw temptation in his way." And, finally, Cramsie's manager being appointed with instructions to wire the amount to the firm's Echuca agency to be claimed by the winner, the stakes were lodged. Of a composite nature they were! "Cash-orders" on the shipping firms and stations were the main currency of the rivers, and the stakes held a

superb variety of autographs of more or less financial solidity. Even the Legislative Councillor, who never travelled without gold—gold payments to dummies and their kin could not be traced !—took advantage of the opportunity to free his pocket-book of orders.

And then the conditions were drawn up on two halves of a sheet of notepaper :—The stakes to be lodged with Cramsie's manager—£200 on the *Pride's* behalf; £100 on behalf of the *Lass*.

Each boat to have a representative on the other. Day and night running.

First through the punt at Echuca.

The boats to start from the foot of Yuranigh Street, called after Sir Thomas Mitchell's famous black Yuranigh (whose grave enclosure was for some time used by a distinguished legislator as a cow-bale).

No warping over pinches and shallows.

Fair heel-and-toe work all through.

Fuel, cord for cord, taken in at Balranald, and no stoppage for refilling at wood-piles permitted. And—fuel not supplemented from cargo.

Last in the schedule of conditions, this proviso might not improbably prove the most important. Races had taken place in which an unscrupulous skipper had used consignee's casks of tallow as

stoking-material for a furnace, paying the same out of the stakes thus illegitimately won.

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They started from the crazy timber thing called the wharf, after a three hours' spell devoted by all hands on the two boats to adjusting top hamper, getting clean furnaces, trimming the barges. Opposite Yuranigh Street they shut off steam, and waited till Cramsie's manager passed a measuring-rod over the stacked cords of wood. The *Lass's* stock was, if anything, under that of the *Pride*. With much greatness of soul, the Legislative Councillor consented to a dozen sticks of firewood being shoved over to the *Lass*.

Then a brawny young blacksmith from the Camperdown country, Victoria, was dropped on the *Pride* as representative of the *Lass*, and the *Lass* received Peter Campbell, selected by Darke, to watch over the interests of the *Pride* on her rival. Peter's main spiritual—and spirituous—sustenance came from the squatters' class. Hence Darke felt that he was safe with Peter.

And then, as the best available substitute for a pistol-shot—a reverberant cracking of Gory Sam from Tanga's stockwhip—and amid a roar of cheers, a full head of steam was put on. With a crash, and a splash, and a rattle, they ran off level. If

the start meant anything, it should be a well-matched race.

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A wire from Balranald had acquainted the Swan Hillites with the intelligence that at last the twin boats were "at it." And, as they rolled by with a duck-like skimming—they were almost level—the people clustered on the banks at the crossing township shouted hints as to the state of the rivers, which might have been valuable if only they had been understood. And—but why particularize all points? Now one was ahead a tow-rope's length and now the other; each was greatly handled, and each answered to her builder's fame.

But, nearing Gunbower, they set down for the final struggle. Dick Pillar—Forrester was wise enough to give up the wheel and do the mate's work—and Gowan were sleepless, and yet each was fresher, so it seemed to their backers, than when the crafts left Balranald.

At Gunbower the *Lass* hung up for a couple of hours to cool her bearings for the final run in. Pillar would have done the same, but he was over-ruled by Darke, M.L.C. There are problems in applied mechanics that even the massive intel-

lect of a legislative councillor cannot solve. Darke could not apprehend the impossibility of running incessantly with heated plummer-blocks, and how he chuckled and chuckled as the sound of the *Lass's* exhaust grew fainter and fainter, and utterly faded into silence.

"He would give those —— (bullockese) selectors somethink to remember him by!" he swore.

But ten miles beyond Gunbower a dreadful message was communicated to him. The wood had given out! Overnight the stock had been drawn upon largely, and now, in the blossoming dawn, it was known that the fuel on board would not suffice for two hours' full running.

Heavens, how he effervesced with bullocky talk! He swore he would stoke the furnace with the (bullockese) carcasses of the (more bullockese) deck-hands!

"I'll be hanged if you do!" quoth Camperdown's son of Vulcan. "Deck-hands ain't wooden you see, Mr. Darke—not being members of Parliament, sir!"

Then he would have had the men's bunks and the cabin fittings broken up for fuel.

"No, you don't!" persisted the Camperdonian. "Not if I knows it!" And the Honourable the Legislative Councillor was beaten again.

But one gleam of hope had he. The *Lass* must be almost in the same plight. And of fulfilment of this he was not deprived, for when, some time after the swift gliding of the *Pride* had given place to a subdued and pulseless motion that was almost retrogressive, she was gradually overhauled by the *Lass*, it was noticed that she too was running at less than half-speed.

As the *Lass* drew near to the *Pride*, Peter Campbell, missioner to the back-blocks, waddled for'ard and shouted. The words were no sooner out of his mouth than—it hurts me to have to relate so painful an incident—the closed fist of a sturdy child of the forest struck Peter's saintly paunch and doubled him up. "Shut up, you old fraud, you! If we're out of firewood that's our look-out, not theirs!" It would have been some consolation to Peter, as he revolved in some inconvenience for some moments, could he but have been sure that his words had reached the Hon. Samuel Darke's ears. As it happened, they did; and Darke and his sympathizers took heart of grace thereby. The *Lass's* people must be in equal trouble with themselves.

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Unfortunately for Darke's two hundred, the

distress of the *Lass* was, however, not quite so extreme as the *Pride's*. The *Lass* had something in reserve.

By slow puffings and feeble paddlings which were ever on the verge of ceasing to propel the crafts a foot further in their course, the two steamers had reached the bend which leads into the reach by Echuca Park. Twenty minutes' fair steaming would see them at the pontoons of the floating-bridge, but how on earth were they to reach the point?

If, during the rapid running, the excitement on the boats mounted with the steam-gauge, there was, as might have been expected, no dropping off of enthusiasm as the steam power grew weaker and weaker. Progress, since Gunbower Mills were passed, was decidedly of an ironical sort, and, had the river been flowing with a masterful flood current, it is quite conceivable that the race would have been declared off from sheer inability to complete the last ten miles of their course. It was, however, sluggish, and the crafts managed, with laborious strainings, to make headway till entering the long park reach. Then even Darke considered the contest not worth fighting. Between the stern-post of the *Pride's* barge and the nose of the *Lass* there was a good forty

yards. It was evidently hopeless for the *Lass* to conquer even that paltry distance and come level. Morally, if not by the precise conditions of the match, the race was won by the *Pride.*

He was saying as much to Forrester and Pillar, when a solid volume of murky cloud burst from the *Lass's* smoke-stack, and with increased firing the *Lass* and her barge shot forward suddenly.

"H——!" cried Darke. "They've been gullin' us!" Then he became too maddened to indulge even in the unqualified vocabulary of the gully-raker and the puncher.

As for Pillar and Forrester, they confessed the game was up. But how the devil did Gowan manage it? Had he burnt his boat's fittings? That was unlikely! He had no rich squatter aboard to stand the damage. Then, how had he managed? Had he not been running fair but had surreptitiously obtained fuel?

The way of it they learned from the reverend sufferer, Peter Campbell. As the *Lass* rushed past them, they could just grasp his words over the derisive cheering of the victorious party—

"Mister Darke, mon, they're boornin' the corpse!"

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It was even so. Dictionary Ned, by a happy thought of Gowan's, was granted his incineration: somewhat prematurely, perhaps, but on the final judgment of the river-men when the subject was debated later, in the way he would have most preferred. And he raised just steam enough to force the *Lass* and her barge the *Duke* through the pontoons.

Darke, at first, protested against the stakes being paid over. "Cargo was barred!" he spluttered. "D——n it! if it came to firin' up with cargo, I'd have shoved in half-a-dozen bales of wool!"

"Dictionary Ned wasn't cargo!" contended Gowan. "There isn't a boat on the rivers that 'ud take poor old Ned as cargo, except Locky M'Bean's *Goldsb'rough!*"

"What in —— would you call him then?" roared Darke.

"Why, an honorary passenger, sir, o' course!" retorted Gowan.

The popular verdict, and the stake-holder's, went with Gowan. And, thereupon, there was the most royal of sprees at the old Bridge, at which the memory of Dictionary Ned was toasted in the most solemn and impressive of silences.

It was Cornish Jim who set the ball of talk rolling once more. "P'r'aps," he said, "th' Arl-maäghty do know 'Is business best aäfter arl!" Jim was like most men. He approved of the Almighty's dealings with him when he was on the winning side.

THE DOOM OF WALMSLEY'S *RUBY*

NOT Randall's *Ruby*, but Walmsley's—an older boat than Randall's pretty, gay little craft, so familiar to the Mildura people — a boat of the seventies and not of the nineties, and built therefore when the river-trade was best going into by wise and keen men. With engines of twelve horse-power nominal, she worked up to fifty; with the firewood aboard for the run from Swan Hill to Echuca she could also carry fifty bales wool and "sundries" on a draught of three feet, while hauling her barge with four hundred bales on a draught of five feet. So she was "a neat 'un to handle" (as the river phrase went), and if she could not exactly travel over "wet grass" (the boat to which was accorded the praise of floating upon dewy pastures touched perfection in the judgment of the river-men), she could achieve the next best thing—she could skim the rivers

when they were "down" longer than any other boat, and consequently earned for her owner a considerable sum in dealing "in trade," in timber-running, and in bringing in to the port the wool-cargoes of larger crafts which had been stuck on a falling river. A clever craft, and no mistake about it.

Fred Walmsley, owner and skipper, was justly proud of her. She had not an inch of gilt-beading anywhere, or a scrap of velvet on her cushions, and yet she was always pleasant to the eye of her passengers, and restful to their bodies. Fred, as a rule a taciturn, gruff, unpolished sort of fellow, was expansively eloquent and courteous to his fares about his boat's performances. Every other skipper worth his salt on the rivers—with the exception of Locky M'B——'s skipper—was accustomed to affect a delight in his own particular boat, even to the verge of unveracity. Fred, however, was under no necessity to fib regarding the *Ruby*. He talked big about her, but she justified every word, and he was a curious man indeed, who, being borne along by the *Ruby*, did not respond to her skipper's generous enthusiasm as to her "lines" and her "model," the taste with which her coat of white paint had been picked out, here with red and there with blue, the shiny

brass of her engine-work and of the wheel, the musical note in her exhaust-pipe, the rhythmic beat of her paddles. Without wife or child, Fred found all the solace of a home in his craft, and gloried in her as other men glory in their home, their pictures, their books, their bank-balance. He would make oath in his rough, ungenial way that he would stick to the little *Ruby* as long as she'd stick to him. He didn't believe, he said, in selling the little craft, which had made the first money for the owner, as soon as a second and larger boat could be bought. That was the river practice, and Fred disapproved of it. It is a curious thing how, in this age that throbs with mercenary passion, and brawls, and cheats, and grows mad with lust of gold, even coarse-bred men grapple to their hearts the most fantastic of affections. Here was a rude river-man, shrewd and keen and not over-scrupulous, a blusterer to his equals, and a tyrant to those over whom he was entitled to exercise a petty authority, who loved the combination of iron and wood called the *Ruby* steamer, as finer-fibred men love their ideal woman, or the inspiring spirits of their art. He loved every plank in her—every bolt and nut. When chaffed about marrying, it was his standing retort that while he had the

Ruby he didn't care (a quite superfluous word) for any petticoat alive.

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Of course, other men interested in their vocation, whose energies are concentrated in the routine of life, have said the same thing, and yet succumbed to a rounded cheek and the flash of a long-lashed eye; and while Fred Walmsley was listened to with the respect commanded by his big brawny shoulders and iron fist, he was never believed. It was a popular jest—never, though, indulged in while he was present—that when the "neat-footed gal came along the little *Ruby* 'ud ha' to take second place an' sing small." The amours of the river-men might sometimes be coarse, but while they lasted Cupid had, as a rule, no more devoted or willing subjects. Not one in ten of the boat-hands could boast truly of being unsusceptible to his shafts, and they did not conclude that Fred-o'-the-*Ruby* was constituted with any peculiar impregnability.

"Go 'long! There ain't a chap on the rivers as I couldn't get over if I wanted ter!" retorted Miss Jenny Forbes, daughter of a wood-pile keeper on the Goulburn, to the indirect challenge jocularly issued to her by "a snagger" to try her hand at subjugating Walmsley. "But you

needn't think as I'm agoin' to fling the handkerchief to any river chap. A reel squatter is my dart!"

Half in jest, half in earnest she retorted so. And the men who listened to her, and glanced admiringly at her, though they resented her words partly, yet thought most of the squatters they knew would surely think themselves lucky if they could win a girl like Jenny.

They were river-men, all of them—all of them, too, snaggers—hands of the *Melbourne*, the famous old snagging boat which did some of the best work ever done in the Riverine. The time was Sunday afternoon. The *Melbourne* was tied to the bank, and the men, in their white shirts and Sunday Geelong tweeds, lay on the green slopes, luxuriating in the balminess of the time, in their thirty-six hours' freedom from work, and in the smiles of beauty.

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A beauty Jenny Forbes most certainly was. Straight as a sapling, she held herself with a springy erectness that added height to her perfectly-moulded figure. Dressed now only in a snowy muslin, she would have graced regal velvet, for as she moved, wholesomely ignorant of all artificial laws of deportment, she gave to

the unrefined spectators a sensation of unreasoned pleasure which a master of the arts and fripperies of the great world would have found it impossible to rebuke. The wonder was, however, not her figure and her airiness of carriage, though indeed both were wonderful enough to people who knew that her parents were poor, wizened, labour-stunted creatures, but her complexion and her voice. That mysterious faculty of nature which prompts her to return upon herself after a lapse of generations, and to revive, in the present, the physical type she had apparently displaced a century ago, had been manifested in this girl. The full, voluptuously-contoured features, the fruity bloom which tinged the cheeks, and contrasted with the pallor of the forehead and chin and neck, should have belonged to one of those fine ladies who, first flinging away their lives at passion's shrine, sat thereafter for saintly profiles to some deathless painter of altar-pieces.

And then her voice! It wanted but that superb touch of education which is communicated by a broken heart to make it an organ of surpassing quality. It had a range in ordinary speech that was as musical as any accomplished singer's, while in laughter it left on the ear echoes so enamoured of their own sweetness that they

refused to die. Give it, give her, but soul and refined intelligence, and tune it and her to the key of a gracious life, and she would be a woman of destiny to more than one strong man. As it was, she was—but a wood-cutter's daughter; a girl of undeveloped instincts and of faculties which, naturally rude, were coarsening quickly in the soulless surroundings of the bush. The "chaff" of the snaggers she answered in her glorious voice with zest and vigour; for other homage she could not imagine than the audacious jesting which was the only form of compliment her admirers preferred; and which she relished. Illiterate, barely able to read, and even less capacity in writing, the girl's fancy was at once stimulated and satiated with such incense of gallantry as the crews of the boats and the timber-getters for Echuca saw-mills lavished upon her. Men of that rough mould are never unimpressed by the delicacy of a woman's nature, and make some response to the thousand little intangiblenesses of accent, and look, and gesture with which the woman who is sheltered by her womanliness chastens the angularities of masculine tempers.

When, however, the woman is herself coarse the rough-natured fellows become rougher. Bodily beauty alone does not refine the woman, and she

guides him in his defects as well as in his better qualities. And so, instead of Jenny's voice charming away the asperities of these uncultivated spirits with its melody like a throstle's song, they rejoiced the more gladly and applauded her the louder that her golden notes dealt out to them the badinage of their time. And the topics that were discussed! The men did not exchange *double entendres*, for there was no need. Neither she nor they felt under any obligation to beat about the bush. Their speech was Elizabethan in its coarse frankness.

So this smiling Sunday afternoon on which Nature rested and permitted the river toilers to rest also, Jenny sat among ten or twelve snaggers, and jested at them and with them, and accepted their patent homage of jests with appropriate eagerness. The *Ruby* had left the Goulburn with timber for Barbour's mill in one of Barbour's barges, and had left her own barge to be loaded up so that on her return she should lose no time in being dispatched with a second load. And Walmsley's name being mentioned incidentally in the girl's presence had led to her asking, "Why the dickens that Fred didn't get spliced?"

"Why, he's waitin' till yer 'll say yer 'll 'ave 'im, Miss Forbes!" had grinned a rouseabout.

"Oh, Fred," broke in a fireman before the girl could speak, "ses as there ain't a gal alive who'd get him ter give her first place in his 'fecshions so long as the *Ruby* don't get snagged an' ruins him!"

Then the girl had answered the implied challenge by the remark we have reported. "Go 'long! There ain't a chap along the rivers as I couldn't get over if I wanted ter!" And as though these words were not depreciative enough of their class, she added poison to the gall by insinuating her ambition to become a squatter's "laädy." A girl who belonged "o' rights" to the rivers to think of going over to the hated squatterdom! Not to be thought of—even though the squatters would jump down one another's throats to get so fine a piece of womankind.

They attacked her then with a humorous earnestness. "Marry a squatter—she! Throw away the cleanest-cut limbs an' nattiest waist, an' most kissable lips on all the rivers—aye, in all Victoria!—on rascally, dummyin' squatters as was a-stealin' o' the lands? Get out, Jenny!" And after a while they changed the mode of their satire. "A squatter! No bloomin' squatter wants a wood-piler! For yer are a wood-piler, Jenny, an' no mistake! Didn't ol' Capt'n Hill"

—Hill, skipper of the snagging boat *Melbourne*, that was—"see yer a-cuttin' down a red-gum tree one day, when th' ol' man was laid up with r'eumatics? An' which o' th' young blokes o' squatters would you be after goin' for, Jenny? Mick of Moira or young Tom of Cannoon; or there's Ewey Mac of up-river? No, no, Miss Forbes, yer stick to th' rivers. You marry Fred Walmsley if he arsks yer—the young Walmsleys 'll come in handy to train up as mates and steermen and to save screws! Nothin' like a lot o' your own youngsters round you, Jenny, to save screws!"

It was their notion of humour to link the girl's fortunes with Fred's, because Fred was distinctly unmarriageable, they thought, and it was by no means unlikely that if any one snapped up Jenny he would be actually a squatter, or at the least a young boss cockie. And the hours slipped away in all their marvellous wealth of colour and scent, till the shadows of trees high up on the western bank dipped into the stream or fell athwart the old *Melbourne*. The girl went homewards then to the miserable hut, standing beyond flood-point on the rise. She refused escort. "Yer afraid o' makin' Fred jealous, or the bloomin' squatter—that's why!" was the parting

shot of the snaggers, and, not displeased, she bade them for answer—"Go 'long an' shoot themselves!" The repartee was not without aimlessness, but it provoked laughter, and much keener wit does not always do that.

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The girl, all untutored as she was, was yet sufficient of the woman to perversely dwell in her spasmodic thinkings upon the possibility of Fred Walmsley giving her a share in his name and in his boat. She really had made up her mind to marry a squatter; but then, till the squatter came along, why not amuse herself with Walmsley? She knew she was "a strikin' piece o' goods"—she had something about her that was pleasing to the men, for on the last snag-boat pay-day had the hands not cleared out Walmsley's stock of jewellery for her? Had not Walmsley himself sold her a length of dress-stuff at less than Echuca prices? Wasn't that an indirect compliment to her charms? Didn't she know that it was her looks that kept the wood-pile going, and not any special need to which the boats were now subjected of obtaining the fuel supplies at her father's pile? And so the thoughts flitted over the surface of her consciousness as the rays of star-shine wavered on the ripples of the river,

till she came to a decision that might hold and might not, just as her feelings swayed her when once Walmsley was in her neighbourhood again.

That happened a week later. He came to pick up his own log-laden barge to run it down to Barbour's mill, and called at the pile to pay his fuel account.

"So many cords, so much, Jenny, an' you owe me for the dress."

"Right, Fred. But you kin let the wood stand. Dad ain't short just now for a wonder."

"No—I'll square up now, for I'm not a-comin' this way till the rivers are down again. The snow-water's coming down the Murray, an' as soon's it's safe to get afloat for 'Bidgee up-stream, I'm off. There's heaps of back-season wool waitin' to be collared on wayside stations."

"Oh!" The girl, wondering at herself for the feeling, could not help being somewhat pained at the news.

The skipper did not notice it.

"So here's the damage, Jenny—unless you want something more?" Walmsley simply saw in a pretty girl somebody to trade with.

"No!" Impulsively, knowing nothing of what she was doing, she challenged his admiration with

the coquettish arts of which she was ignorant. "I want nothing except——"

"What?" questioned Fred, intent on business.

"You!" With something of coyness, something of hoydenish dash, she muttered the syllable. Blaming herself the next instant, she yet would not have recalled it. All defiant, she had yet become entangled in the delicious meshes of an entangled affection. Thinking much of Fred, she had unconsciously learnt to love him.

Fred did not understand her immediately. Then he disbelieved her. A jolly good joke she was having! But no petticoats for him; so—

"Lord, Jenny! what's made you sweet upon splicin' just now?" He laughed gaily before he resumed. "An' you're pokin' borak at me!"

"I ain't! Look here, Fred—I'm tired o' this firewood bizness. Won't you have me for your gal—an'—an' take me 'way? Oh, I'll make yer a d——d good wife, Fred, I will—an' you'll see how smart I kin be at sellin' thin's!"

She was convincing herself as she proceeded to the point of emphasizing her newly-born desire for a lover by the oath which was not infrequently on her lips. As for the *Ruby* skipper, he stood for a minute amused and amazed. Then, turning away, he gave her good-bye.

"No wimmen for me, Miss Forbes, even if yer weren't a sort o' jokin' with me. I don't wish for no other kind of wife than my little *Ruby*. So long!"

The girl quivered with the shame of her repulse. She knew now her fate; she really did love this river-man who cared not a rap for anything beneath the sky save his boat; and he—well, he had laughed at her, and would tell the chaps at the public-house bars how Jenny "had given herself away." Hitherto, with much reason to feel ashamed at times, she had never known the sensation, but now she knew what it was to be pricked with the myriad needle-points of a late-born modesty. Till now she had been but a beautiful lissom animal. Henceforth she was a woman, from whose eyes looked, for the first time in her score of years of life, a soul. She had learned to suffer, and to the feminine nature which is deriving that lesson from the Nessus robe of circumstance, all things are possible.

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Even revenge. True, 'tis an old story how a woman scorned becomes at heart a hell-fury, but all modern art is but the presentiment of the old, old episodes of life in newer settings. And yet this story differs from its prototypes, which speak

of the woman's revenge direct upon the man. Not so was the man hurt herein.

The rivers came down suddenly, bearing in their swollen currents the juices of the snowy ridges, and the oozings of lowland hillsides, and the lower streams took upon themselves depth and breadth, and became alive with fish and fowl, and those creatures of prey, the humans. But only for a few weeks. It was a short rise—a brief foretaste of flood-time, when the great wheels would turn and churn the waters into foamy spray, and take the ore of the yellow water and mint it into precious gold. And the boats enjoyed but a spurt of work. Some were stuck up in the narrow ridges of the Murrumbidgee—two, with their several barges, on the reef near Pental Island—a fourth within hail of Sturt's Billabong, where some day Australia will build a pilgrims' shrine "on those shelving banks." But Walmsley's *Ruby* was fortunate enough to regain the port.

Fred, doubtful whether he should tie up his craft, or join in what, in that state of the river, was the risky work of exploring the State forests on either side of the Murray, was musingly regarding the "State of the Rivers" sheet, posted under the Post Office verandah, when a saw-mill manager hailed him.

"Can you run up to Goulburn at once, Fred, for us? We have a couple of barges ready loaded. They've dropped 'em down from Shepparton to near the junction."

"I was just thinkin' whether 'twas too risky to go up as far as Tocumwal."

"Take my word for it, it is! Better run up for us. You can only get a short job till it's certain whether there is more water to come down, or whether it's run out. What d'ye say?"

"Done!" said Fred Walmsley.

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Jenny had attributed to him an injustice. He had not told the story of her love-making at the township pubs, for he had, after his first amusement, let the thing slip from his mind in the concentration of his energies upon the day's task. Nor did he recollect the incident until he had brought the *Ruby* carefully to the spot where the mill's two barges were tied up, waiting haulage to Echuca. Then he thought of it, for Jenny stood on the rise, waiting the approach of the boat. She had heard the *Ruby's* exhaust, and had recognized it.

In the time that had gone since the *Ruby's* departure and her return, the girl had changed. Her colour, once so steadfast, came and went

with the passing tempers of her mind. To outbreaks of coarse speech directed towards her parents succeeded moods of pathetic self-loathing, which they understood as little as she did herself. The mystery of sorrow was pressing upon her in all its poignancy. Death—even the uneducated can comprehend his presence; physical disasters too can be understood by the common people; but the finer issues "in clear dream and solemn vision" are perceptible only to cultivated minds. They in whom fortune has not sown refinement cannot recognize but only suffer. Jenny Forbes was such.

She had been crying in dumb, inarticulate fashion for Walmsley to come back, and here he was! Had he come for her? The hope that plucks at straws, and the shadows of straws, was fledged in her heart—and died in the instant she saw him. She knew he had not thought of her.

"Mornin,' Jenny!" He hailed her from the bank.

"Good-mornin,' Mister Walmsley!" she, hugging the pain, forced herself to say. She would never call him "Fred" again till he asked her to marry him.

Unconscious of the wound he was inflicting, and quite unmindful till the response had passed her lips, that the form of his question was identical

with that which had led to her curious outburst on the last occasion of their meeting, he called out—"Do you want anything?"

He meant, of course, stores — dress-stuffs, groceries, what-not. But the girl, whose humiliation was ever present to her mind, took the inquiry in the light of a reminder.

She flamed red—then her pulse stopped, it seemed to her, and the pain within her so tightly clenched her vocal organs, that instead of the exclamation rushing forth in the rich throatiness of her voice, it was uttered in a sharp cutting whisper:

"You devil!"

Fred remembered then all the details of the former episode. And he laughed at the recollection—with humorous tones in his harsh laugh.

The girl, holding a clenched fist to her side, ran up the slight hill, maddened. On the crest of the rise she paused and looked back. Through a cleft in the clearing an expiring sun-ray, widening like a blaze of fire, enveloped the pilot-house and the jeering boat-captain.

It must have been from that simulacrum of a conflagration that she drew the inspiration of her deadly thoughts.

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The *Ruby* was to return in the morning. And because no danger could be suspected in her snug resting-place by the Goulburn junction no watch was kept. Only the great lamps with their hundred facets sheened the placid stream. Walmsley saw they were trimmed for the night before he turned in at ten o'clock.

At midnight there was no sound but the lapping and the wash of the river. The girl who is moving forward makes no noise, you may be sure. She is in stockinged feet.

At sundown there had been stored against the wood-pile keeper's hut, in a lean-to, a great heap of dried wattle-bark. It was so much tinder. And the bulk of it, or at least sufficient for her purpose, this girl had moved to the boat to serve as tinder. Upon it she had heaped wool waste from the *Ruby's* own engine-room. Tinder, all of it! And, yet not content, she unscrewed the cork of a kerosene-tin, and the fluid trickled and covered the waste and the bark.

It had been dead calm. But, an instant before she struck the match, a gentle breeze arose to help her in her work. The decking was set ablaze without trouble.

She had calculated upon ten minutes' burning before the smoke and the crackling would rouse

the men. The breeze must surely have been the breath of Erinnys. Within her allotted ten minutes it gave her the advantage of double the space.

The ill work sped as ill work always does. And when Fred, at last aroused by his men, dragged himself to the bank, half-dazed by the smoke, he knew the task of fighting the flames was hopeless. The little *Ruby* was doomed. And, as so frequently happened during the off-season, he was uninsured. He had let his policy lapse with the last wool-trip.

From the west of the rise the girl looked down upon her work and her rival. The boat was gone —that was evident! Neither seriously nor jocularly could Fred avow that the steamer would ever contest his affections with her again. Stark still, save for the trembling that shook her, she gazed, and hated herself for her triumph. Yet she would not have undone the work if she could. Let the consequence of a woman's hate stab herself to death daily, yet, under like conditions, she would so act again.

BESS O' THE RIVERS

"ONE—two—three—four—five—tally!" And through the five coils was passed the rope-sling.

Truck H72 was being unloaded. It was a box-truck, and the red seals of the Customs-house clinging in fragments to the parted doors showed that its contents were "in bond." And therefore the complete variety of tally-clerks were in attendance.

Her Majesty's Customs department in Victoria was represented; so was the Customs department of that (to Victoria) foreign state and disguised enemy, New South Wales; so was the Victorian Railway department; so were the forwarding and shipping agents; so was "the boat." Four clerks and a mate—these constituted the company of "tallyers," which supervised the transfer of a few tons of fencing-wire from the railway-truck to the barge of the *Tooronga*.

It is a way we have "in the colonies" of fetter-

ing every branch of industry and department of social activities with shackles, in order that some Civil servant may be paid to take them off. The advantages of this system are obvious—to the owners of property in the capital cities, to the politicians, and to the Civil servants. It is not so apparent to the men who have to employ bone and sinew to make the earth yield its riches and to smile with harvests, or who are seeking to build homes and coin fortunes out of their own energies. But then, this latter class is of no importance compared with the gentlemen who are privileged to levy toll on their fellows. This has nothing to do with the story—and yet has everything to do with it.

* * * * *

For Archie Black, the *Tooronga's* mate, thought in this way, and being of the elder race of rivermen who, having an idea, were accustomed to fling it out in vigorous speech, in scorn of consequence, he took the opportunity of the stevedore's "Spell O!" to declare as much.

"I say," he said to nobody in particular, but to the group of tally-clerks in general, "this wire's for M'Farlane, of Nap-Nap. I wonder what old Tommy thinks he's payin' for the stuff?"

"What d'yer mean, Archie?" asked Banks, of

the Victorian Customs. "Of course he knows what he's payin'! Nine pounds a ton, I s'pose, in Melbourne in bond. Any donkey can add rail-carriage, duty, steamer freight, and agency charges to that!"

"Jest so, jest so!" said Black. "That's all right so far as it goes, but it don't go far enough. Those are what you may call the straightforward charges. What I mean is what you can't call the straightforward charges. Look at all you Customs chaps —half-a-dozen o' you in Melbourne to see as nobody carries out o' bond in his w'estcoat pocket a ton or two o' yer wire, and so diddle Her Most Gracious out of a few quid; an' then another half-dozen o' you at this en' to pass the coils from the truck, an' see Her Most Gracious ain't robbed here. Why, all you coves' screws are to be paid out o' Nappy Mac's pockets, an' the pockets o' such-like fools."

"We do our day's work for our day's pay," growled Banks. "We didn't make the work!"

"I didn't say as you did, did I?" pursued Black. "I don't blame you. But I do say as all this Customs business is all red-tape and rot. The squatters are bled, an' the selectors are bled, and the boat-owners are bled — all to put gold-lace an' frills on you Government

chaps. What —— nonsense it is that we can't carry a few coils o' wire from one side o' the river to t'other for a man's fence an' help him to pertect his prop'ty, but we've to pay shippin' dues, an' wharfage, an' tide-waiters' fees, an' transfer fees, an' clearin' fees, an' all th' rest o' th' —— humbug."

Black said this with the perfect good-humour characteristic of him. He was always amiable, was Archie, except when, once a month, he "used to get the drink in him." If, however, his temper was not ruffled by the warmth of the controversy he had excited, that of the Civil servants was.

The stevedore's signal for the resumption of work was allowed to pass unnoticed in the bitterness and heat of the discussion which ensued. The number and scope of the "charges" of the several public departments concerned with the Riverine trade were, at this period, a constant irritant to the legitimate workers, and the men who profited by them, feeling their position insecure and ever assailed by the adverse opinion of their paymasters, clung the more tenaciously to their brief authority and their fees. Archie's attack was accordingly resented with virulence, and the immediate work at hand was neglected for a time. But the stevedore, to whom time

was money, did not care to submit to loss in order that the corruption or the uselessness of the Government officials might be exposed. He was at the winch himself, and as the five coils were already slung waiting for the hoist he "let her go" without, however, the customary shout of caution. The dispute distracted him.

As though the steam had gathered a new fierceness during the short "spell" time, it beat the valves and roared and rushed through the cylinders in a spasm of revolt against the cogs and ratchets that tried to conquer and regulate it. The stevedore lost, for one fatal moment, his grip and his nerve, and as the barrel madly revolved, the great bundle of half-rusted iron was caught up—swung defiantly out of the grasp of the lumper who sought to guide its course, and paused for so long as a child might breathe, then flung itself over the barge that lay beneath the cranes. With a cracking and a creaking that blistered the ears with repellent sound the tense chains fell through the sheaves of the crane-jib and hurled the coils to the bottom of the barge-hold. The craft quivered with the shock from stern-post to stem, and had it not been that something came between the coils and the planking and dulled the impact, the wire would, in all

probability, have started a plank and sunk the *Tooronga's* barge where she lay. But the—something—served as an effective fender.

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When the winch was mastered, and with slow revolutions hauled up the chains and rope again, the sling did not come up slack and empty. It seemed a brutal way of sending the thing up, but it was the most expeditious way. From the river-level to the decking of Echuca wharf the ascent was by narrow and tortuous steps up which it would have been a gruesome and arduous labour to have carried a corpse. So the lumpers in the hold tied the body of Geordie Allen, late steersman of the *Tooronga's* barge, into the sling and sent it up. An infinitesimal experience of paralysis—and then, death.

Between the tallying of five coils and the tallying of ten, and all because of an off-hand remark in which there was more joke than earnest, a soul had gone to its account. Of such accidents life everywhere is copious enough, but on the rivers, in the early seventies, it was more than copious—it was prolific. Next to the indifference of the rich, Death finds his most successful ally in the thoughtlessness of the poor.

* * * * *

So, again, thought Archie Black, when, next day after the inquest, the river-men in port followed Geordie Allen to the little cemetery on the hill. And so thinking, he spoke to the crowd which, not ignoring the time-honoured fashion of a river-man's funeral, gathered the same night in the long-room of the Esplanade Hotel.

"Boys," he said, in the pause that followed the first gulpings of "she-oak" and "brown-sherry," —rum was still a favourite drink on the Murray —"'tain't no manner o' use blamin' the boss stev'dore an' the owners for accidents like Geordie's. Geordie's 'gone inside' because chaps as ought to a' been doin' their dooty was chin-waggin'. I'm not goin' to shirk my whack o' the blame. I set the ball a-rollin', an', now I thinks of it, pretty near ev'ry accident that has happened in my time is just because some fellow has been doin' the same thing. 'Taint the bosses always. If we chaps as has to do the graftin' were a little more mindful o' one another, we wouldn't have to fork out for the widders and orphins so often."

"'Ear, 'ear!" in respectful, subdued tones from several places in the apartment. The Esplanade's patrons were not garrulous and noisy to-night. The shadow of the inscrutable "inside" was

over them. And—which of them would be the next?

"An' so I says, boys, I'm chiefly 'sponsible for the puttin' 'way o' poor Geordie Allen. If I hadn't gone for a dig at the Civil Service coves, I'm quite sure that Geordie, instead o' bein' a stiff 'un, would ha' been here takin' of his liquor, like a man, an'——"

"Beg parding for interruptin', Mr. Black," said solemnly a red-gum sawyer. "Wot's—I mean as wot was Geordie's fav'rit' p'ison?"

A youngster "roustabout"—river-men never would say "rouseabout"—laughed inquiringly. It was his first "relief" meeting, and the incongruity of the question struck him, but the only explanation tendered him was a cuff on the ear, and a "Shut up, younker!"

"Geordie's poison, boys," answered Mate Black, "was rum hot!" And, checking himself in his speech, he prepared for that ceremony which inaugurated every relief meeting.

"Shillin' in, boys, an' winner pays for rum hots round. Balance starts the fund."

There was no applause, nor dissent. This was the expected—the "regular thing." The shillings were thrown down—some modestly, others with a touch of display, like the method of the land-

boomer of a later day as he dropped his five-pound note into the collection-plate, still others with an element of grudgingness about them. Forty-three shillings and forty-three rums hot.

While the drinks were being prepared in the bar, the mate took up the thread of his address.

"As I was sayin', chaps, we ain't half careful enough of one another. An' so as to put the brake on this sort o' thing, I puts it to you as we must 'stablish a new custom on the rivers. Whenever one chap is directly or indirectly the cause o' another's goin' inside, it's to be understood as he starts the fund with a month's screw——"

"I thought the shillin' in was to start it!" exclaimed the "younker," irrepressible in his flashy ignorance.

"That was the old rule. We makes a new one to-night if you're agreeable. An'——"

"Are you willin' to begin the custom in this 'ere case of Geordie's?" persisted the boy. "You takes the blame, yer ses. Are yer a-willin' ter come down now with yer month's screw?"

"If that whipper-snapper an' cheeky sapling 'ud hold his tongue for another minute, he'd ha' heard me say that very thing. The coves wot know me on the rivers know I ain't a chap to ask others to do what I daren't do myself——"

"'Ear, 'ear!" in deep-chested chorus. The mate had the reputation he claimed. He did not order merely—he was wont to do.

"An' so whether you falls in with my 'dea or not, I shall plank down my screw for this month into the hand of the cove you selects for treasurer —twelve-thirteen-four!"

"'Ear, 'ear!" again. And so barring forty-four sixpences, the relief-fund for "Bess o' the Rivers" was started, and a new river custom established.

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The rums were brought in, and Pippy Taylor, the landlord, threw his shilling down also for his chance. And then they counted round to see who should take the pool, pay for the drinks, and head the list—£1 2*s*.

Mate Black, presiding, began the call.

"One!" he said. And so the numbers went round—now gruffly, now shrilly, now in bass, and now in treble, now grunted, now sung, till seventy-seven was reached. That was the winning number. A fireman of the *Cumberoona* was "seventy-seven," and his face was good to look upon as he gathered in the coins, paid half to the landlord, and handed the other moiety to the chairman. Generosity invariably blesses the giver—especially when he is giving what others have subscribed.

"Fred Jones—*Cumberoona*, Mr. Black—twenty-two bob," he called.

And his name went down on the list, and beneath it: "Archibald Black, *Tooronga*—twelve-thirteen-four."

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Black rose with his steaming glass in his hand. And those of the throng who had seats followed his example, till all stood.

"Boys," said Black, "here's luck to the woman Geordie's left." And Geordie's tipple was drunk to the future of the woman Geordie left. There was always a woman. And what better compliment to the dead than to drink his favourite "p'ison" to his dear one's luck?

"Wife or mother?" questioned one, when the glasses were down again.

It was curious how, after a fatality, relief meetings were frequently convened before any precise information was to hand as to the position of the bereaved. And it was as pathetic as it was curious, for it proved the existence of a belief that the man who "went inside sudden" generally bequeathed no other legacy than the distress which is more poignant because accentuated with pennilessness.

Black answered—

"Neither, I think—nor sister—but a sweetheart."

"In 'Chuca?"

"No—town. An' I've got his last letters to her from his bunk—I can't find any o' hers, an' he ain't finished—but he'd got the envelope written, an' I guess she's neither mother, nor sister, nor wife, but his girl!"

"Wot's her name?" asked a deck-hand of the *Riverina*. But the look the "chair" gave him, and the sibilant hiss from the crowd, made him wish he had not spoken. They didn't mention women's names lightly in the river-workers' meeting. They left that to the fine gentlemen of the Millewa Club, who were the *élite* of the aristocracy of the Riverine.

"Never mind her name," said Black. "At least all of it. Her first name is Elizabeth—poor Geordie calls her 'Bess'—an' that's enough for ev'ry one as ain't on the committee. It ain't like as if she was his own kin—then you could call this fund straight out 'Mrs. Allen's Fund,' or 'Miss Allen's Fund.' But you can't call this by her name. You can tell pals here she's his girl—but you can't stick it up, as it were, all over the country."

"'Ear, 'ear!" said most. But one exclaimed—

"You must have a name for the fund!"

"Yes!" responded Archie, "so I moves as we calls it 'Bess' Fund—Bess o' the Rivers.' That's like takin' her under our pertection." And to these honest souls the words contained no *double entendre*.

"I second the proposishun!" said a burly engineer from Mackintosh's mill.

And the "Ayes!" had it—deeply and sympathetically, but not unanimously.

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Then a sub-committee was formed, with Black as chairman and treasurer, and the subscriptions were recorded. From "fivers" to "five-bobs"—the latter sum from the "younker," who was just "on wages"—were noted. When the cash was not forthcoming, orders were drawn on the boat-skippers and mill-foremen. And at monthly pay they would be duly honoured.

All subscribed but three or four. And they, not because they did not regret Allen's death, or were unsympathetic, but from another reason, declined: "They did not see why they should furnish the house for another chap!" said one—and he spoke for the other dissentients. The reason had some force, and for a few moments the proceedings were stayed. At last—

"The Committee have decided to read Geordie's

unfinished letter," said Archie. "They're goin' to take the sense o' the meetin' as to whether the girl to whom Geordie—as clear-headed and as good-hearted a chap as ever breathed—writes like this can't be trusted to do what's right with money given to her because we liked him. An' them as don't think so needn't subscribe. An' now I'll read the letter. The chap that interrupts or laughs will be chucked out. There, that's straight!"

The caution was needless. There was no desire to laugh—the "younker" even, with his youthful lack of sentimentality, looked and felt interested.

"DEAREST BESSIE," the letter began—the reading was halting—

"I hope this will find you well as it leaves me at present. I have asked the skipper to tell the agents' Melbourne office to give you my pay this month—I don't want none, and, dear Bessie, I know it's better with you than with me, for you know, dear Bessie, I would go on the tear a bit if I had the cash. You say I am not to come down soon so as to save all the more for our marriage——"

Black paused. More than one brown and blistered hand fumbled with pipes here. The blessed things wouldn't draw!

The reader went on—

"I thought as you was a bit hard at first, but now I've considered it over, you are right as you always are, dear Bessie. I know you wants to see me as bad as I wants to see you, and it's a——"

"There's a blot here!" said Black. "He forgot he was writin' to his girl."

"It's a good thing as your pretty little head is screwed on right——"

From among the intent and breathless audience, the fireman of a timber craft jumped to his feet.

"Look here, chaps!" a generous passion conquering his reluctance to speak, "we've heard enough!"

"'Ear, 'ear!" from most.

"None of us would like the words we write to our girls to be seen, would we?"

"No—no!"

"Then stash the readin', I say. The girl's all right. And we're poor God-damned sort of creatures if we can't trust the girl to make good use of what Geordie's left her. For that's jest what 'tis, chaps. 'Tis really Geordie's legacy to her—what we gave him for old-times' sake."

Again the resonant "Hear, hear!" shook the room. Mate Black refolded the blotted, ill-scrawled sheet of paper with a calm, judicial—

"I knew you'd say that, boys!"

And then the dissentients fell in with the views of the majority. What with cash and "orders" the subscription was sixty pounds odd. That meant, by the time the boats then running trips, and the river township's "pubs" and the Customs-houses had been canvassed, a full hundred pounds. The girl might want it or she might not—they really could not say. But, as Black remarked, "The chances are she does. Bargemen's girls don't roll in wealth. An', besides, it was a d——d good opportunity for 'stablishin' a custom o' makin' us pay for one 'nother's deaths when 'tis our fault."

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And the girl—for whom these rough fellows were so solicitous? Was she worth the rude chivalry of their protection?

The morning after the meeting, Archie had to sail for Hay. But the machinery of charity organization was ever ready on the rivers. The much-derided Civil Service fellows knew how to get the lists out, and how to get them in again. Charity was red-hot among the boating interests, for, to tell the whole truth, the river men were huge drinkers, and the pub-keepers who cashed pay-orders in advance had a nasty

habit of getting them lodged at the agents' offices in readiness for pay-day. When a boat-hand was on the "tear" he was apt to forget both his friends' woes and the orders he had given to alleviate them. And so the Civil servants who were supposed to attend to the clerical work of the subscription-funds—and a lot of work it entailed one way and another—used to circulate the lists quickly, and get them in as speedily. By the time Archie came back from Hay, there was the hundred pounds and a few pounds over.

As the *Tooronga's* skipper entered at the Victorian Customs, Banks said to him—

"There's that money for Bess o' the Rivers—Geordie Allen's girl. Can you let Archie run to town about it? Francis, the station-master, has promised a free pass if you will."

The skipper promised, and Archie Black travelled at the Government expense to "fix up the fund." He took with him a Bank of Victoria draft.

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In four days he was back. And the draft was uncashed in his pocket-book.

He had gone to the address given on Geordie Allen's envelope, and found it a small shop in Lonsdale Street.

"Can I see Miss Russel?" he asked timorously of the sodden-featured drab behind the counter. The mate had tackled a crowd of drunken deck-hands fearlessly, but he became a coward, he felt, in approaching the bereaved woman who was dead Geordie's love.

"Russel—Miss Russel? I don't know no girl of that name!" grumbled the drab, who had anticipated a customer.

"No! Not Miss Bessie—Miss Elizabeth Russel?"

A sudden gleam of interest flashed into the filmy eyes of the shop-keeper. She stood and faced him.

"Where'r you from?" she asked.

"Echuca!"

"Oh, oh! you're Sal's chap, are yer? You're her chap, Allen—I told her I'd give her away. Look here, you —— fool——"

Black raised his hand.

"No!" he said, "I'm not Allen—he's dead. I'm a friend of his!"

"Dead!" was the brutal rejoinder, "and a d——d good job for him, too! He'd ha' been dead soon enough had Sal married him. What a —— fool he must ha' been to ha' been taken in by her!"

"Where is she? Isn't her name Bessie Russel?"

"Bessie Russel—my eye an' Betty Martin—I know'd he wrote her under that name to here; but she an' me's fallen out, an' I won't have no more to do wi' her. She's Sal Gordon—the worst girl on Melbourne streets."

"Where is she?"

"You'll find her in Romeo Lane—an'—look 'ere!"

"Well?"

"Take a bobby wi' yer, if yer goin' there!"

* * * * *

In a small room that was furnished with scarce aught else than the memories of a thousand lecheries he found Geordie Allen's love. The "Bess o' the Rivers" fund was merged into the next local charity subscription.

JIM THE REBATER

On the Upper Murray.

The snow-water is rushing swiftly between the eucalypt-bordered banks, and on the fretted and billowy surface of the green water float boughs and branches that drank their primal sap from the ice-cold heights of the Snowys. Nestling in a fork of a sapling are some sprigs of a blooming acacia, whose roots are in the Tumberumba country; a tortuous creeper, torn by a storm-blast from the valley of the Eucumbene, clings to a trunk which was nourished hard by Kiandra. Like a big-sized bully into a throng of school lads comes crashing through the swirl of the current and the lighter timber a monstrous bole that the water has just wrested from the clayey banks of the greatest of Australian rivers. The tangle goes down-stream together to communicate, in the quaint language of Nature, its message from lofty, snow-rimmed peaks to plains which burst

and split under the brazen sky, and to tell the poor human, who toils and sweats amidst dust and aridity, that, after all, there is a joy and a glory in the world which the great Riverine squatter, who tops the market with his wool, cannot purchase with his wealth. And with the tangle and the stream goes—a soul.

The big log will forge its way through reach and bend, and will evade the grappling rope as the sawmillers try, one after another, to lasso it as it is hurled by their craft. It will voyage so for hundreds of miles, and then it will be stopped by a snag, which will hold it tight and still tighter, till the suction of the under-tow draws it down and down, and embeds it in the bottom drift, and it becomes a snag in its turn—the fatalest of tools to rip up planks and open seams, and to destroy in one desperate instant the fruit of laborious years.

And the soul, too, goes down-stream with the mass of wood stuff, and after its journey of a few hundred miles it too falls a victim to the vicious undertow of life, and becomes in its turn a snag, which shall wreck another soul.

* * * * *

Jim Fitzgerald came of a second generation of "gully-rakers." The grandfather had been one

of the assigned hands of a Monaro pioneer, and, by the time he had won his freedom, had gathered a tidy little herd together—a head here and a head there, a "clear skin" of his master's now, and a Umeralla "wild 'un" then. He put his brand on them, and, with a block of "out country" and an occasional addition of a "stolen and strayed" bull or cow, did well. The ex-convict's son took congenially to the business. The father had known some restraints of conscience, but had been careful to give his boy a training which had dulled in his earliest youth any tendency towards straightforwardness in dealing with other's goods. A course of instruction which consisted almost entirely in scouring gully and plain in order to stock a mountain fastness at a neighbour's expense, was not likely to induce a delicacy of discrimination between what belonged to him of other species of property and what did not. And nobody was surprised when, after an excursion to Boyd Town, on Twofold Bay, with cattle, he did not return promptly. A sentence of twenty years on the roads for horse-stealing interfered with his engagements—and no living soul regretted his fate.

He had a wife and a boy of five when his "misfortunes" happened. The boy was too young to understand, and the wife—well, she thanked

God for the crowning mercy of her husband's arrest. She had the habit of consulting Providence on all occasions, for she had "found Christ." When a young woman who had just left school at Sydney, she had heard in the old York Street Chapel a sermon of the red-hot Methodist stamp. The discourse was warm with the old-fashioned hell, and splendid with particular details of the old-fashioned heaven, and instinct with a passionate yearning over a doomed race, fierce with an intense horror of sin, gluttonous of conversions, mad with the madness of the Hebrew prophets over the stiff-necked and the perverse. No wonder the girl, whose people had sent her to school because her home-life was not likely to make her "a lady," became "convinced of sin." She knew nothing of life, but of sin she knew (so she fancied) much. And then, after one of those experiences of storm and struggle which are all indispensable conditions of growth, so the old-style Methodists thought, to the new soul, she "found peace."

When she married, inveigled, she scarcely knew how, by the dashing young cattle-dealer who came once or twice a quarter with stock to Boyd Town where her people kept store, she did not lose her faith. On the contrary, it deepened and strengthened. Every fresh revelation of her husband's

wrong-doing was a stab welcomed to the martyr's heart. Only, when the child came, she craved that the Lord would help her to save the boy from his father—perhaps for the Church. And in the father's arrest she saw the hand of God.

By the time news of his conviction reached her in the Fitzgerald homestead in a Cooma valley, she had made up her mind what to do. Some few head of stock she had brought with her upon her marriage. These and their increase she sold, and then, first bidding the police do their will on the rest of the stock on their run, she took her child and her money and disappeared from the knowledge of the district. The child was hers, and the money she took was hers—and as to the future, was not the God of Sarah and Rebekah and Mary her God? He surely would save the lad's soul as He had saved hers.

And now, seventeen years after, the child of five, grown into the young man of twenty-two, stands upon the river-bank at Corowa, and watches the struggle of the brush and timber with the stream. He has settled everything with his dead mother's lawyer, and has just been handed, in the form of a bank-draft on Melbourne, his fortune. Not many hundreds—only five or six; and yet a fortune to the lad who has never

left the river-side, and to whom the cities are places unknown, save for the one dread fact—"the bad men lived there." "Mrs. Fitzgerald's Jim" had been known to all the country-side and river-side people, and while many quietly laughed at, all, at least apparently, deferred to her method of training him. A storekeeper only, though she might have coined wealth by joining a drink-shanty to the store, she had always paid her way. To do that and to bring Jim "to a sense of sin" were her two ambitions. One other desire had she—to keep from her boy the knowledge of his father!

Men who did not hesitate to swindle her, yet respected her wishes as regards Jim. Not for the youngster's sake, but for hers, they stripped their blasphemy of its ornate blooms, and refrained from telling yarns which are unprintable and singing songs which pollute the ear. They would not teach him euchre, nor induct him into the comparatively innocuous mysteries of "fifteen-two, fifteen-four." They even reduced, when in his presence, the length of their snakes, and the amount they had lost when Dan Morgan had stuck them up. They spoke of Jim among themselves as "Jim the Vargin." To his mother he was the child of many prayers, and as she could not be blind or deaf to the difference in

the way the bullockies and bushies generally treated her lad and the way they treated others, she felt the prayers would be answered sooner or later. Were the rough fellows kept from tempting her Jim, that was God—her God! and surely, though the signs were as yet uncertain, God's mercy was following, and He would be moved by her strenuous strugglings to give unto her boy both the "conviction of sin" and the grace that sustaineth under the conviction, and that drives the penitent to Christ.

And so, while Jim whistled in his care-free youth, his mother wrestled in her agony for his salvation.

* * * * *

When she was dying, her faith was undimmed. She murmured that charter-song of the Methodist who has "found peace"—

"O happy day, that fixed my choice,"

and pleaded that the Lord would bless her at the last with the knowledge that Jim, too, "could read his title clear." And Jim, wrought on by his grief and his desire to grant unto her the one consolation she craved, fancied, as so many others have done, that the emotions of his impressionable nature were the stirrings of the Spirit, and said

words to her and the Wesleyan minister who had come from Corowa to her bedside that made her completely happy.

Waiting at the river-bank at Corowa to be picked up by Mackintosh's boat going down stream with huge logs lashed fore and aft on her hulking barge, he fingered mechanically the envelope in his pocket containing the draft. He took it out and looked at it. From the folds dropped a bit of cardboard. It was the "society class-ticket of the people called Methodists." They had lost no time in enrolling him, and as he looked at it, he recalled the whispered appeal which had accompanied its issue to him.

"Jimsey," said the class-leader, an old south-country man, "thee be motherless now, lad, an' I know nawt o' yer airthly father, but ye 'ast a heavenly one, Jimsey—don't never forgit that. An' stick to th' class, lad—it'll 'elp your soul mighty w'erever y' be."

The words came back to him, borne, so it seemed, on the rush of the current. They reminded him of his loss, and strangely drove in upon his mind, in a manner quite foreign to his ordinary experience, that he had never known his father. Father and mother and sister and brother had the one parent he had known been

to him, and somehow, with that easy acquiescence of youth, he had never troubled himself to specially inquire as to his father. The district gossip allusively referred to Mrs. Fitzgerald as "the widow" as often as by her own name, and he had taken the implication for a granted fact. But now, with the new rootings in his being of thought and reflection, he pondered over this gap in his personal history. Was his father dead? Then was it not singular that his mother should not have spoken of him and his resting-place?

Suppose he was not dead, but alive? Suppose, further—the young man was gaining some insight into life, and was becoming familiar with some of the more vulgar aspects of family relationships—that his father had abandoned his mother? Would he, in that case, ever meet him?

With the fervency of his new-born enthusiasm for religious practices breathing upon him, what more natural than that he should then and there pray that he should meet his father, if his father were still in the flesh? And he knew, in the curious reflex action of spiritual exaltation, that his prayer would be answered.

* * * * *

Carpet-bag in hand, he sprang lightly from the bank to the dingy which rowed in shore for

him. The dingy, on returning to the steamer, was steered round the surging mass of river drift-wood. Young Jim, still boyish in his ways, dropped his disengaged hand into the water, against the current. A tiny branch of the acacia, laden with golden snow, the fluffy globules glistening dewily in their bath, was swept against his fingers. He grasped it, and scarcely knowing why he did so, withdrew it from the stream. As he sprang on the decking of the steamer, his impulse was to throw the wattle back into the water. But the hand of fate arrested the movement, and a thought, new to him in its suggestiveness of sentiment, arose.

Why should he not keep it as a memento of his home country? It would dry and shrivel perhaps, but it would still speak to him of the Upper Murray country wherever he went. So he retained it.

* * * * *

"Now, my young cockerel," exclaimed the mate as he came up to the new passenger, ticket-book in hand—Jimmy Mackintosh, of the Echuca sawmills, cannily Scotch in his ways, was careful to demand vouchers for every trifling transaction of his multifarious business—"wot's yer name, an' w'ere 're yer for?"

"Echuca," said the youth, "and James Fitzgerald is my name."

"Oh! oh! Jim Fitzgerald, is it? An' who's yer dad?"

"My father—but what's that got to do with you?"

"Oh, nuthin'," answered the brawny timber-jigger, "on'y our bargeman is named Jim Fitzgerald—an' I b'leeve he comes from somew'eres up this way."

"My father is dead," answered the lad, and paying his sovereign for the fare, he turned away.

* * * * *

Timber-getting on the Murray, even when varied by a little judicious evasion of the forest regulations and a quiet bit of smuggling—not all the tobacco smoked in Riverina paid border, or indeed any, duty—was a somewhat monotonous life, and the steamer-mate was but one of many who would have seized upon such a trifle as the coincidence of the names of his bargeman and his passenger to spin upon it jokes as to their supposititious relationship. At the mid-day spell, when a rouseabout relieved bargeman Fitzgerald at the wheel of the barge, so that he might go aboard the steamer for his snack, the mate was fertile with chat—more fertile than delicate.

"Hello, Jim! 'ave yer seen that young shaver we're takin' down—the chap we picked up at Corowa?"

"No," growled the bargeman, "an' I don't want to, neither."

"Wal," joked the other, shaking himself with laughter, "that's bad, now, consid'rin' as he's your son."

Fitzgerald, tall and lathy for all his years, thin-flanked, bushy-bearded, with eyes that strove in vain to look straight at men and things, was pierced by the arrow shot at random.

"What the —— do you mean?" he sharply said, starting from the seat.

"Oh, nuthin'," said the other, "on'y you jest go an' ask the chap—he ses as he's yer son!"

Now, Fitzgerald the younger had said nothing of the kind, but the humorous mate thought it an element of fun to be unveracious. Strange that he had thought so, for he had not cultivated his sense of humour in the city club smoking-rooms, where they discuss reputations with a regard for wit as pronounced as their disregard for truth!

With a repeated oath, the bargeman swung out of the cabin. "He'd see, he would, what the —— young blag'ard meant by sayin' he was his

son!" As though the relationship when proved would be a disgrace to him—him, the erstwhile gully-raker, ex-Cockatoo-Island felon, and present timber-getter.

The elder found the younger sitting aft, gazing at the rolling, swaying barge, and wondering, in the introspective fashion of youth, where this voyage was to lead him.

"I say, younker," demanded the bargeman, "who are you? An' wot do yer mean by sayin' yer my son?"

Shaken out of his reverie, the young fellow looked up wonderingly.

"I—I—said nothing of the sort! My father's dead." And then a filmy reminiscence floated like a vaporous cloud just within the horizon of his experience, and through it loomed indistinctly and undefined a bushy-bearded face, and hands that used to toss him to a horse's mane.

"At least," he stammered, "I always understood so!"

Face to face with the youth the father knew his son. There was the outline of his wife's features; something in his eyes of that clearness of vision which had never failed to look straight at things and at men, save when her husband had shamed her, and when she bore vicariously

his disgrace. These he saw. Moreover, from the heart of one the impalpable, irresistible shafts formed of kinship went to the heart of the other.

The father knew his son, and the son knew his father, and accepted the recognition as the answer to his prayer. Such curious survivals does Nature give us, first blurring or crossing them. The mother had craved that the son might lean on prayer as on a rock. The strain of her intense faith came up in him—and lo! it had worked to the destruction of her other great hope, that he might never know his father. Of such paradoxes is life full.

* * * * *

Had there been in the mind of either the slightest doubt as to the identity of the other, the one feeble link needed to complete the chain of evidence would have been supplied by the dripping branch of acacia which the younger Fitzgerald held in his hand.

The father caught it, and the lore of the bush, which seems to implant itself unconsciously in the natures of men who are careless of its value, prompted him to the inquiry—"Where did you get that wattle?"

Not now the half-impertinent retort of youth:

"What business is that of yours?"—but the bare truth:

"I picked it up an hour ago!"

"Did you? Why, that is Tumberumba wattle! You can't get that in these parts."

"I picked it out of the river as I was coming aboard."

"Oh," said the father, with an accent of disappointment. "You didn't pick it up near the Tooma Creek?"

"No," said the other; "just as I told you—but it could have come down stream, you know. Where is the Tooma? Doesn't the Tooma run into the Murray?"

"Why, that was where you was born, between the Tooma and Tumberumba!"

Again the inquiry which yet to the questioner seemed so unnecessary:

"How do you know that?"

For answer: "What was your mother's name?"

"Emma!"

The father received the shock outwardly unmoved. Did he not know it?

"Was she good—religious?"

"She was a Wesleyan, and they thought a good lot of her."

The words were convincing.

"Come to the barge—I must have a talk with you," said the elder.

The steamer slackened a second to allow the barge to draw up, and to be fended off when father and son leapt on its for'ard cargo. They pursued their conversation, which meant so much to both, so fatally much to one, on the wheel-platform.

The talk revealed many things to the man as well as to the youth. He told his son how he had gone gold-digging, how after years of failure success had come at last, and how then he had sought his home, but, to his dismay, found his wife and child missing. And the young Jim swallowed the lie. "I ain't a-denyin' it, my lad"—the rogue forced a paternal kindness into the words—"I ain't been as good a chap as I ought to 'a been. I wasn't never good 'nuff for your mother." Affecting repentance now, and sobriety of behaviour and speech, he did not jar upon the lad, and won his liking insensibly.

* * * * *

Now, there was in existence at this epoch of Riverine trading a practice that robbed the Victorian railways of no inconsiderable portion of their revenue. The system of making rebates or refunds of freight on all goods carried over the

lines for destinations beyond the Wakool Junction, in order to attract the lower Riverine trade to Melbourne, supplied the reason for this practice—and the profit of it. The method of the fraud need not be told at the present time of writing. Suffice it to say that big men made big money by it. Some small men were ambitious of doing the same. One of these latter was bargeman Fitzgerald. When his son handed him undoubtingly the bank-draft on Melbourne, he saw a way to do it. He bought a share in a boat.

A railway-clerk, a shipping-agent's clerk, and at least a mate or bargeman—these were the tools necessary to the fraud. Fitzgerald himself could look after the boat's share of the swindle; he had the shipping-agent's clerk "readied up"; he wanted but one more accessory—the railway-clerk. And here, in his son, he found the desideratum; for it was an easy matter in those days for a riverman well known in Echuca to obtain for his son a billet in the Customs or railway. And Jim, junior, had been not indifferently educated, and was soon well up in the routine of checking way-bills and freight invoices. In two months he was rebate clerk—expert in checking and passing the sheets on which shipping-agents and boat-owners presented their claims for re-

funds. To distinguish him from the father, who was "Jim Fitzgerald the Bargeman," colloquially Jim, junior, became "Jim the Rebater." And the bargeman's plans throve right prosperously.

* * * * *

For some months they throve, and then the mocking devil which lives in the core of every ill deed and forces it, from sheer derision, into the light of day to become a thing abhorrent, prompted Jim the Bargeman to reveal unto Jim the Rebater a scheme for an unusually large haul of fraudulent rebate vouchers. Then the boy, so far an innocent tool—doing things in routine fashion because others had done so, and his superior officers had told him to do it—awoke to the criminal nature of his doings. He refused.

Several times he was pressed, but refused always—swore, moreover, to inform the station-master of the roguery that went on under his nose, were he asked once more.

And there was, the bargeman thought, that mother's strain in his son's blood which would have made him carry out his threat in spite of consequences. So he would not press him further.

* * * * *

The great mills were busy. Night and day

were the giant saws going, tearing into beams, and planks, and battens the spoil of New South Wales forests, and shivering into the timber of commerce monster red-gums with a breaking-weight of 10,000 lbs. to the square inch. And the boats were busy too, unloading the raw logs, loading with the milled material. Jim's barge lay under the shoots up which the huge boles were chain-hauled to slide down similar ways to the saw-beds. Jim was guiding the chains one night when his boy came down. The night was gloomy, and the work was proceeding in the glare of big reflector-lamps, which threw here broad splashes of brilliancy, and there shadows as of midnight.

"Good-night, father. I heard you were in, and came down to——"

"Well—what?" The bargeman felt that pretences need hardly be kept up longer.

"To say that I must tell Mr. Francis"—Francis, now acting-commissioner, was station-master then —"of these rebate tricks."

"You've got —— vartuous all of a sudden. Who's put you up to this now?"

"My mother's memory!"

"Hell! 'Tis always your cantin' hypocrite of a mother. You're gettin' as big a sneak as she was!"

"My mother was a good woman—and I'm sorry I cannot be as good. But I've been to class——"

"What!" roared the father. "Methody class?"

"Yes."

"D——n you! That means as you mean to give me 'way, do you?"

* * * * *

The head of the shoots was in a sheet of darkness. Who can say what happened? A slip either side would precipitate the stumbler. On the river-side he could receive no injury but a shaking. On the other——

Jim the Rebater tripped—or was thrown. The guiding-chains slacked, but it was not the great descending trunk that gave him the fatal blow.

The saw caught him first.

HIS FATHER

A TALE OF NORFOLK ISLAND[1]

THE Special Commission was opened with due ceremony. His Honour the Commissioner passed through a double rank of military guards, preceded by a company of javelin men drawn from the Island Police, and followed by his retinue of military and civil officers. A step behind his Honour marched side by side the Civil Commandant and the legal gentleman who had arrived from Hobart Town with the Special Commissioner, to prosecute for the Crown. Unlike his Honour who was new to the colonies and to colonial institutions (though it was more than suspected by his intimates that he was Australian by birth), these gentlemen were conversant with the ins and outs of the system, and with all the involved

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eccentricities of justice as administered on the Island before-time. Consequently, they were quite prepared to make up for any deficiency in the experience of the Special Commissioner, by the amplitude of their own knowledge and acquaintance with the vagaries of the convict nature. They might safely be depended upon to give to his Honour the Judge just the aid he required to secure the conviction of the accused.

Needless to say, the chief portion of the calendar consisted of offences of one sort or another against the person. The occasion when crimes against property, by theft or fraud, could occur on the Island, were necessarily few and far between, while there was no prisoner, even if immured in the gaol cells, who had not the amplest opportunity for threatening or attacking the life of a warder, or of a soldier, or of a fellow-prisoner. It was no wonder, therefore, that the young Commissioner sickened as he glanced at the long list and read "Murder," "Attempted murder," "Assault with intent to murder," "Assault," "Cutting and wounding," and nearly every other form of words that the ingenuity of legality and the System had devised, as descriptions for the various efforts whereby wretches of one kind had endangered the lives of wretches of another kind.

It was, indeed, with something like relief that, half-way down in the calendar of forty cases, his Honour discerned a simple charge of theft—"The larceny of a key, the property of the Civil Commandant."

* * * * *

It was well on to the afternoon of the first day before the case of larceny was called on. The preceding cases had taken but little time to dispose of, owing to the fact that most of the offenders had pleaded guilty, and the two or three cases where the accused had pleaded otherwise had not taken long to investigate and decide. The Jury was of course a military one, and as the regiment had had some years of colonial experience, the officers composing it were too familiar with their duty as jurors to waste much time in debate over the merits or demerits of the Crown case.

So all the circumstances conspired to bring Edgar Jameson, *alias* John Smith, *alias* Edgar Brown, *alias* Thomas Vaux, *alias* half-a-dozen other names, convict, charged with theft, as promptly as might be before the Special Commissioner. Whether it was well or ill that the prisoner's case should have been heard thus early,

must be left to the fates to decide, but it is more than conceivable that had the charge against the many-aliased gentleman been heard later in the Sessions, he would not have been treated so singularly by the Judge-Commissioner, and would therefore not have had the opportunity of figuring so prominently as he did in the transactions of the Court.

The Clerk of Arraigns called up prisoner Jameson, and the man being presented, he was formally indicted. Diving into the midst of a turgid stream of legal tautology, the bare fact was grasped, that on Christmas Day in the preceding year, he, the accused, stole an article, the property of the Civil Commandant, "to wit, one key," and, his plea being demanded, the prisoner asserted he was not guilty.

Let us look at him as he stands in the dock. A man approaching sixty years of age, of clean-cut features, with a curious, indefinable delicacy modifying the angles of the face, with blue-grey eyes, with scarcely perceptible eyebrows, with hair originally light-brown but now interwoven with white and grey, with a complexion no doubt fair at first, but now freckled to brick red, he stands tall and erect. He has a fearful record against him, and though only accused on the present

occasion of a comparatively trifling offence, yet, scarred in record and in conscience with the countless indelibilities of far more heinous crimes, he is a very Ishmael. The Crown Prosecutor informs his Honour he is even against his fellow-prisoners on the Island; he makes war upon them as well as upon the System; he has no friend, and yet in some mysterious way he coerces other prisoners to the point of following him. Therefore it is that he is brought before his Honour—the offence being one of larceny only, could have been dealt with by the Commandant himself, but the prisoner is such a dangerous element in Island life, that if he is found guilty—and the Crown Prosecutor has no doubt in his own mind that he will convince his Honour and the military gentlemen on the Jury that the prisoner *is* guilty—a sentence of transportation to Moreton Bay will be pressed for.

"This man, your Honour, has education, and he is fertile in resource, and were he to take it into his head to conciliate his fellow-convicts instead of merely domineering over them, he would become a terrible power in a conspiracy." The Crown Prosecutor explained in explanation of his singular explicitness that, though there was no direct proof that the accused had really engaged in a con-

spiracy, there were many indications which, pieced together, led to that impression upon the minds of the Island officials. Much more in this strain would the prosecuting lawyer no doubt have uttered, with the intention of prejudicing the Jury, if he had not, to his own surprise and to that of the Commandant, been suddenly stopped by his Honour the Commissioner.

Why the Commissioner should have interfered was also a surprise to himself. He said—"Mr. Attorney, I fail to see why, if you have no evidence to support your view as to the prisoner's origination of or participation in a conspiracy, you should thus refer to him. Proceed, please, with the evidence on the charge."

Rebuffed in this fashion, Mr. Attorney, cursing his Honour beneath his breath and making resolves that he would show the young whipper-snapper that even if he were a pet of his Excellency's in Hobart Town he could not ride rough-shod over the old stagers of the System, proceeded with the charge, and called his witnesses.

First of all was called a fellow-ganger of the prisoner's, who proved that on Christmas Day the prisoner and himself had been deprived of the usual holiday for some act of insubordination, and were kept in one of the Longridge Quarries at

work under the supervision of a constable of the Island Police. The Civil Commandant had come over in the afternoon to Longridge, and had visited the Quarry. He had stood looking down from the edge of the overhanging cliff, and the ganger had noticed that something that glittered for a moment in the sunlight fell on the ground just as the Commandant had withdrawn his handkerchief from the inner pocket of his uniform jacket—"just as though," said the witness, "he had pulled out a key with the handkerchief."

Here the Commissioner again surprised himself and the Court by interjecting—

"Witness, has not that last idea been suggested to you? Did it ever occur to you that the article which glittered as it dropped was a key, before any one mentioned that a key had been lost?"

The witness remained silent for half-a-minute, evidently deliberating with himself, in a confused and troubled way, as to whether he should play the cards of the Commandant or fall into the humour of his Honour the Commissioner. Then his Honour became impatient and pressed for an answer.

"I think as 'ow—I mean as I never knew about the key till arterwards. It was somethink bright, that's all I know." So the man replied.

"Proceed," said his Honour, and the Crown Prosecutor, nettled, took up the examination again.

"Tell the Court what happened afterwards, that Christmas Day."

"As we was agoin' to barracks, Jameson 'ere slipped on the top o' the cliff, an' as I turned to look at 'im I saw 'im lift from underneath 'is leg somethink, an' close 'is 'and tight on it."

"And then——?"

"I watched 'im 'old 'is 'and tight shut all the way to barracks. An' when I asked 'im in the yard that night what was it he found, he laughed an' said: 'What isn't lost isn't found,' but the nex' day when it was told everywhere that the Com'dant had lost a key while walkin' out on Christmas Day, I was standin' close by Jameson when the word was given us in the yard, and 'e looked at me and I at 'im, and I knew then that 'twas the key as 'e 'ad found."

Again came a surprising interruption—as the old-time officials thought it—from the Bench. "You knew—how could you know? Did you see the key?"

"Utterly irregular," sneered the Crown Prosecutor, in tones that were audible half through the building; "utterly irregular."

But to his Honour the witness made no re-

sponse, and he was ordered down. The accused, asked whether he would cross-examine the witness, laughed a derisive negative.

Then the Commandant entered the witness-stand. With as much glibness as was consistent with the dignity of his office, he told his story—how he had been taking his constitutional stroll on the Christmas Day, and how in the course of the stroll he had visited the Longridge Quarry, where were working the only two men on special punishment that day, the accused and the former witness. He was quite sure that he had the key in his pocket when he set out on his walk, and as he kept that particular key in his inner breast-pocket with his handkerchief, it was quite possible, indeed probable, that he had pulled it out in the manner described by the other witness.

"What did you do," asked the Crown Prosecutor, "when you discovered the loss of the key?"

"I made known the loss and offered a reward of an allowance of tobacco for the discovery of the key."

"And how did you come to connect the prisoner with the loss?"

"I heard through one of the warders that the last witness had seen Jameson pick up something

on the cliff on Christmas afternoon. I interrogated the pris'ner, but he denied all knowledge of the key."

"How," pursued the Crown Prosecutor, "do you connect the key and the prisoner?"

"I had him searched, but unavailingly, and a search through the ward wherein he sleeps gave no better result. But we secured the evidence that he had had the key in his possession by finding its outline stamped as though forced in by some heavy substance in the leaves of the pris'ner's Prayer-book. I should say, your Honour, that on the Sunday afternoon there was church service, and the pris'ner and the last witness were in the yard in time to attend the service. When I heard that the pris'ner had picked the key up——"

"It has not been proved that the prisoner picked the key up."

The sharp words came curiously from the seat of justice. Really, the Commandant felt that for some inexplicable reason, his Honour the Commissioner was actually defending the prisoner!

"Well, the article he picked up I thought he might have left in the church—pris'ners often hide things there, your Honour, if they get a chance, and that is how we came to examine the Prayer-

book. On finding the impression of the key it was shown to the pris'ner, and asked if he could explain how it came there. He was insolent and refused to answer."

"The key was an important one?"

"Very. But the pris'ner could not know of its importance, I must say that."

His Honour now spoke.

"And you mean to say, Mr. Commandant, that the key was not found on the man?"

"No, your Honour."

"Nor traced to his possession?"

"No, your Honour."

His Commandantship was becoming irritated at this persistent interrogation, and was at no pains to hide his irritation. The thing was so clear that a child could see it. How could the impression have been made in the Prayer-book unless Jameson had found the key?

"You produce the Prayer-book?"

The Prayer-book was produced and handed to his Honour open at the place where the impression had been made. Indented clearly through several leaves was the outline of a small key, and on the cover of the book such a mark as would have been made by grinding it with the boot-heel of a heavy foot. The Commandant explained his

theory of how and why the impression was made. The key had been slipped in the book, and then the man had kept his heel on it, while the impression was designed to permit a duplicate key to be made, should opportunity serve.

"How do you explain," questioned his Honour, "your identification of this impression as being made by your key, Mr. Commandant?"

"I am sure that there was not another key like mine on the Island, and I am equally positive that the key has never been out of my possession till I lost it."

Thus the Commandant concluded his examination-in-chief.

"Do you wish to cross-examine the witness, prisoner?" asked the Clerk of Arraigns.

"Yes, I wish to ask the Commandant how did he know that the Prayer-book stamped with the key-mark was the one I used on Christmas afternoon?"

Since his arraignment, the prisoner had not used so many words. The intonation was that of an educated man, and possibly it was that quality in the voice that made his Honour look up sharply, and gaze more steadily at Jameson than he had yet done.

"You were in C 3 seat, upper row," replied the Commandant.

"But how do you know that book was the one I used? The books were handed to the chapel-keeper as we went out of the gallery."

"That is true," answered the Commandant. "But your trick of turning down the corners of successive leaves of the book during the sermon is well known."

Then, turning to his Honour, the witness said—"I forgot, your Honour, to say in my examination-in-chief that the pris'ner has a trick of turning down the points of the pages. He has been watched scores of times at it, but it is only lately that we have discovered that it was one way he had of sending a message."

"What clever devils you are to be sure!" laughed the prisoner, "but you can't prove that I ever sent a message that way at all."

The Commandant went on, still addressing the Commissioner: "But if your Honour will look at the book and turn down the corners in the folds already made, and connect the letters touched by the points, you will see, I think, sir, that the letters will form words or names."

"Do it——I wish you joy, sir, of what you may make out of it." So the prisoner jeered and gibed.

The Court waited breathlessly, while his

Honour turned down carefully some twenty pages, and tracing with great care the letters touched by the points.

If his Honour had surprised every one by his conduct of the case so far, the sensation of astonishment was still deeper now. Again and again he went over the letters he had marked down on the paper before him; and again and again he looked first with wonderment, and then with wonderment and pain mingled, at the prisoner and at the Commandant. Before he spoke again nearly a quarter of an hour had elapsed, and in the intolerable hush that held the Court in suspense, a sardonic whisper from the Crown Prosecutor who, like the Commandant, did not take the trouble to disguise his impatience, and who apparently addressed himself to no one in particular, fell upon the ears of the prisoner in the dock.

"I wish his Honour Mr. Special Commissioner Pelling would hurry himself." These were the words which the Crown Prosecutor had murmured half to himself. And as Jameson heard them he reeled as if he had been struck.

That was the first time, singularly enough, that he had heard the Commissioner's name mentioned, and without doubt it had some special significance for him.

But the Court had no time to give to the prisoner—no thought for his astonishment or his suffering. It was sufficiently engaged with his Honour, and his Honour's declaration.

In a voice scarcely to be recognized, so remarkable a variation did it disclose from the amiable precision of all his previous speech, he said imperatively: "I shall adjourn the Commission till ten o'clock to-morrow morning, and require the prisoner to be brought to me privately in half-an-hour from now."

The Crown Prosecutor rose. "Your Honour, with all respect I submit that the proceeding is utterly irregular."

The Special Commissioner had already risen from his seat.

"Mr. Attorney," he said, with a dignified harshness of tone, "the Commission which I have the honour to hold makes me master of my own procedure. Clerk of Arraigns, adjourn the Court."

* * * * *

Within the half-hour, four of the warders, not less amazed than their superior officers who issued the instructions, brought the convict with the many *aliases* to the room to which the Special Commissioner had retired. The prisoner was manacled.

The Commissioner, seated at a table, still wore his wig and gown. He was a young man, not more than twenty-five or six years of age, with a curious blending of weakness and strength revealed in his features. Before him on the table lay the Prayer-book. As the prisoner entered with his guards, the latter were ordered out by his Honour. "I wish to speak to the prisoner alone," he said. And then he looked Jameson up and down with a penetrating glance in which there was something of fear. Fear of what? Scarcely of personal violence! Could it be of shame?

At last his Honour spoke. Pushing the book towards the other, he said: "The corners of those pages turned down touch letters which, linked together, make certain names."

The other stood immovable, wondering—half-smitten with a fear himself.

"Do you remember those names?"

The prisoner smiled that cynical smile of his. "Yes," he said, "it is one of the ways I have of punishing myself. I spell out the name that way of a woman and a boy."

"Do you know that woman—and that boy?" Again that cruel huskiness of voice.

"First of all—sir—before I answer that question, will you let me ask you one?"

"Yes," said the Special Commissioner, "what is it?"

"Is it true that your name is Pelling?"

"It is."

"And your Christian name?"

"The name of the man—or boy—indicated by the letters touched by these points."

"Then," the man bent forward eagerly, resting his manacled hands on the table, "I will answer your question. "The woman's name was Jessamine Pelling—and the boy's name—the name of the boy who is now a man—is Edgar Terence Pelling. And the woman was my wife—and the boy, or man, is my son!"

"Kind Heaven, be merciful unto me!" As he uttered this ejaculation, wrung from his very heart, the young Commissioner bowed his head.

The other looked on cynically. "Ah," he said at last, "I have often pictured our meeting—father and son. It is twenty-two or three years since I saw you, Eddy—you were a tiny tot in petticoats when I was first convicted."

"Mercy!"

"No, it is not for the son to cry mercy to the father," jeered the other; "it is for the father to ask mercy from the son, and crave a light sentence; but tell me, boy, how do you come to be Special

Commissioner? And was it some suspicion of the blood-taint in you that made you be just in Court and fight for me? There must have been something, for never yet did Special Commissioner in Norfolk Island battle for the accused as you did for me to-day."

Then the son indeed knew why he had been prompted to take the stand he did in Court.

When will the analysts discern the spiritual relationship in blood molecules?

* * * * *

When the Court re-opened next day, to the surprise of every one (except the prisoner) the man named Jameson withdrew his plea of "Not guilty," and substituted for it the plea of "Guilty." Thereupon the Special Commissioner sentenced the larcenist to seven years' transportation to Moreton Bay. Whence, shortly after his arrival, he escaped.

"HALF-CROWN BOB"

A SKETCH, A STORY, AND A LETTER

THE SKETCH

NOBODY knew who first gave him the sobriquet. He did not know himself, and, as he once said, "it fitted him, so he didn't care." Nor was anybody any better informed as to the exact time that Robert Strathing lost his identity in "Half-Crown Bob." Many were the discussions when more exciting topics were scarce, as to whether Bob's nickname arrived with him when he made his appearance on Pleasant Creek, or whether it was of purely local origin, and owed nothing of its appropriateness to Ararat or the other goldfields previously honoured by Bob's presence.

Once indeed, when a tremendous fall of rain prevented work at the claims for some days, and every other controverted point in the camp

politics, sociology and theology, had been thrashed out at Pat Davey's shanty, the bar of which served not only for spirituous refreshment for the inner man, but also as the arena for contests of all sorts —from the kind regulated by the code of the P.R. to that controlled by vague reminiscences of Parliamentary procedure—a row royal took place on this latter question. A new-comer from a Southern diggings, prompted by recklessness and the juice of the great Western grape, had asserted that the whole of the Pleasant Creek populace didn't contain enough mental capacity to devise so characteristic a name. Ararat, he thought, might be clever enough to do it, but he doubted even Ararat. In his judgment, so happy an epithet could only be the offspring of Ballarat genius—Ballarat, the big and brilliant. Of course, this slur on the inventiveness of the Creek people could not be allowed to pass unresented. The new-comer was hotly supported by other late arrivals, from what was, even in these early months of the "sixties," generally styled "The Golden City." To them were joined men who had matriculated in their mining career at Ararat, at Forest Creek, and on the Waranga, and who, caring little for Ballarat, cared less for the Creek field.

Quite a formidable band of combatants were all these, but the indignant defenders of the Creek reputation were as numerically and physically strong. The result was a contest which was epochal even in a period when no day passed without its battle; but as the parties were equally matched, victory could not be truthfully said to rest with either side. And it was perhaps better so, for, leaving the original problem unsolved, it also left a decent excuse for another fight on a future occasion. There were, to be sure, some hasty brains and impetuous souls who wanted the matter settled one way or the other. These were, however, so few as to be powerless. With them must be classed Bob himself, though he was neither hasty-brained nor impetuous-souled. Bob, it has been hinted, didn't object to the qualifying term, without which he was never spoken of, and seldom addressed, but he did object in his heart to being bothered about its origin and the place of its birth. And though he was one of the most peaceable creatures living, he rejoiced at the fight because he believed it would have the effect of determining, once for all, where he had won his title. Some men would have been proud to have been the primary cause of such a combat, and prouder still to think that other collisions were

imminent for precisely the same reason. Bob was, however, different. He never gave a thought to the personal honour done to himself. His interest in the fight and his regret that it had not "gone to a finish"—apart from its making a break in a rather dreary and monotonous week—were untinged by selfish gratification. It took up his time to have to reply to people who asked him how and when and where he came by his name, that knew almost as much about it before they asked as he did, and his time, he used to say, was really not his own. That was the basis of his hope that the fight would settle the whole thing, for, of course, the victory of either side would have been tantamount to a decision as to the locality at least whence he had gained his sobriquet.

It seems, looking back on these olden and golden days, a trivial thing to have excited so much curiosity, stirred up so many fights, prompted such lots of apparently impertinent questioning. Only a nickname! But the men who lived the life of those ancient digging days—and life was worth living then—knew that nothing was trivial. The frivolity of their behaviour and the commonplace of their talk were simply the safety-valves of an intense existence. Men who would else have gone

mad or to the devil, had their sanity or moral equilibrium preserved by trifles. A great colonial Judge once remarked that he was only saved from becoming a mental wreck, at the height of his gold-madness, by carving cherry-stones which he had ridden nearly two hundred miles to obtain. Trifles that were nothing but trifles—trifles behind which stood great facts and solemn truths—these made up the leisure life of the miners on the early goldfields. Now, "Half-Crown Bob," the nick-name, was a trifle; but it was a trifle behind which there was an important and interesting fact —"Half-Crown Bob," the man.

Once people knew the man, they ceased to wonder at the fictitious name suggesting inquiry and curiosity. There was a young Petre, for instance—a scion of the noble English house—who forgot all the traditional reverence for the saints canonized by the Mother of all Churches, and put the martyrs and confessors to no better use than to swear by—how he sneered when, on his first evening in camp, his tent-mates spent most of the hours in debating about Bob's name, and Bob himself! (His mates, by the way, were Clarendon, formerly of the 10th Hussars, and who had made one of the gallant troop who had ridden up Balaclava valley, and Tilbury, the son

of a bishop, whose enormous influence did not suffice to save his boy from merited University disgrace.) But after he, Petre, met him, Bob, the next day, how resolutely he entered upon the quest of discovering all about Bob and all about his name. Not in an impertinent fashion, mind you. Petre, though a ne'er-do-well, and the seventy-fold returned prodigal, who would yet make his seventy-first journey in search of the husks, was still a gentleman, and would not have poked the tip of his bejewelled little finger into another man's affairs against his will. But Petre had been impressed by Bob, as everybody was impressed who came in contact with him. And by that "everybody" you must please understand everybody—from the old Van Demonian "lag" who was cook at Ledcourt, the neighbouring cattle station, to the aristocratic gold-commissioner who dwelt on or did occasional business with the Creek.

All knew Bob. The newest chum, who came but yesterday, the lightest-winged (and luggaged) bird of passage, who, being usually of the hawk variety, found it desirable to stay no longer than a day or so on the Creek; the "oldest inhabitant," who came with the first rush, and who had determined to stay until he had "panned-out,'

—all knew him, and loved him. It's a strange thing to say of the fluctuating fifteen thousand people or so who made up the Pleasant Creek population in the early "sixties," that they all knew and loved a young fellow who had no other name than "Half-Crown Bob," and whose antecedents were enwrapped in mystery. It's a strange thing, but a true one.

"To know such and such an one is to love him," is a phrase heard not seldom; and when it is used, one of two things may generally be predicted: either that the "him" is a "her," or that the loveworthy personality is known to but a few, and them only of his own class. Said of "Half-Crown Bob," the words meant much more. From first to last Bob must have made the acquaintance of twenty thousand adults and children more or less "grown-up" during his sojourn on the Creek. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that that number had made Bob's acquaintance. It was part of the ceremony attached to the reception of every fresh arrival that he, she, or it should be taken and shown Bob's claim and tent, and their owner if visible. It mattered not whether the new-comer was an old hand at digging, or whether the he, she, or it (why don't the grammarians invent a compound gender?) had

been so short a time in the Colony that the sea air still lingered in his, her, or its clothing, and the ship's motion was still visible in his, her, or its gait. All had to go, willy-nilly, and be shown "Half-Crown Bob's" habitat.

"Been to see Half-Crown Bob's place yet?" queried a couple of "the boys" one day of a surly-looking fellow as he was driving in the last peg for his just-erected tent.

"—— yer, no, I haven't, and don't want ter, —— yer!" was the sulky but emphatic response of the tent-pegger, as, rising, he turned defiantly on his interrogators.

"Don't want ter, don't yer? Well, we'll see about that. Yer see, my dear friend," and the speaker's eyes twinkled dangerously, as he used, it is to be suspected ironically, the insinuating phrase, "it just 'appens to be a sort of rule of these diggin's that everybody 'as got to be interdooced to that gent as I've just named. So come 'long!"

The tent-pegger was an old Pacific Slope man of the picturesque "Forty" period. Many a muss had he been into and got out of with credit to himself and damage to his adversary, and the "beads" he had drawn and the men he had "dropped" formed not the least despicable amongst

the records of the duello as practised by the Argonauts. As he rose to his full length, a very ugly customer he looked. During the exhortation to come and be "interdooced" he had shortened his grasp on the billet of firewood which served him for a mallet; and, as the exhorter ended in what were doubtless intended to be persuasive accents, but which, unfortunately, suggested formidable consequences in case the invitation was declined, the billet flew straight for the exhorter's head. It was followed by a condensed Commination service. Despoiled of its objurgatory ornaments, the language of the service implied that the billet-thrower hadn't the slightest idea of "coming 'long"; and, what was more, he would make it particularly hot for anybody who persisted in asking him.

What was the sequel will take longer to tell than it did to happen. It was Bill the Smelter who, wishing to be neighbourly, had proposed to "interdooce" the latest arrival. It was Bill the Smelter who had made the exhortation above reported. It was the same Bill the Smelter who, owing to old-time expertness at "mid-on" in the cricket-fields in his native Kent, had caught the piece of wood as it hurtled fearfully close to his head, and let the sender "have it" before the

lapse of a second full on the left leg, a couple of inches below the knee.

"I think yer'll come 'long now an' be interdooced," said Bill, as the ex-Argonaut fell (the limb was broken), easing his descent by more extracts from the damnatory clauses. And the ex-Argonaut was introduced straight away, being carried to Half-Crown's claim in his own blanket, from a fold of which Bill took the precaution to remove something known in camp parlance as "shooting-irons."

When Bob heard the story he turned his back on Bill and refused to speak to him. He set the fractured limb—he had picked up a knowledge of bone-setting in his college days—and with his gentle touch and kindly smile soon broke through the crust that overlaid the Californian's heart, and made him thankful after all that he had been "interdooced"—so thankful, indeed, that he abandoned his resolve to shoot Bill on sight.

As for Bill, the fact that he suffered keenly from being under Bob's displeasure did not make him the less ardent in "interdoocin'" people. It must be said, though (so that Bill shall not obtain too much credit), that there never was any occasion to resort to extreme measures with any subsequent

comers. Anybody who was unconsciously about to follow the example of the Californian, and had an objection to be "interdooced," was forthwith told of the billet-cum-broken-leg episode, and the narrative had the invariable effect of cancelling all objections. In fact, everybody was the better for knowing or only seeing Bob, and, what was more, every one knew and felt as much: and everybody included representatives of every type of human nature and every nationality under the sun. Not Bob's own class only, unless, as Petre once remarked to a Tilburnian ejaculation, "Wonder what was Bob's 'set' at home?" "Bob's set then! God knows! And He knows now that Bob's set includes every soul upon the field. I don't know whether it's wrong, lads" (Clarendon was present besides Tilbury), "and I don't care, but I often think when Christ comes again He'll hold Right D. 27,964." From which it may be seen that much eating of husks had not totally destroyed Petre's perception of good, though certainly the reference to Bob's miner's right smacked of irreverence.

A unique personality it must have been to have thus attracted all sorts and conditions of men. Let us see what its outer shell was like. A strongly-built but lithe form, bold, with an erect-

ness that seemed to add to its more than average height, was crowned with a massive head, round which clustered crispy curls of dark hair and beard. The head looked, in profile, that of a handsome man, its contour was so clear-cut. But gazing straight into Bob's face you would never consider him handsome. There was a broad, high forehead, but it was seared with lines of thought and anxiety that had no right to be there if mere years went for anything. There was a long, delicately-curved nose, with nostrils that dilated in passion. There were a mouth and a chin that meant strength, and yet were features wherein it seemed laughter and smiles would, had affairs gone well, loved to have nestled. All the elements of manly beauty, one thought, and yet the face was not a handsome one. Why? The eyes answered the question.

Sunk to an unnatural depth, they spoilt the aspect of the whole face, or you thought they did, until you discovered that they were not so deeply sunk but that you could fathom in their depths a quality of their own. And once you saw that—and nobody who took a second look at Bob could help seeing or feeling it—you forgot all about the other features, and how they lost their effect through the singularity of the eyes. You saw

only the eyes and the soul, the greatly-tortured but magnanimous and tolerant soul that used them for its windows, and looked through them on to the world that had used their owner so cruelly. Of course, every man Jack or woman Jill of those who gazed into Bob's eyes could not perceive all this, but those who did not, felt it, as has been said. Anyhow, all understood it. As if by instinct, all knew that Bob had passed through an awfulness of trouble that would have killed most men, and was even then carrying a burden that perhaps not one of the many strong and true men on the Creek could have borne and remained sane.

It was one of the most inexplicable things how this idea spread and got a universal grip on the Creek populace. Intellectual clods absorbed it in their dull brains; preternaturally sharp fellows, who were born with razor-edged wits, and who had kept up their fineness by incessant attrition with the legal forces of civilization, mastered it no sooner. This was the secret of Bob's influence, and the reason everybody loved him; everybody knew that he had suffered beyond the suffering of all others there; and they knew, too, that not an atom of a noble nature had been warped or destroyed in the refining fire. The simple felt that if trouble

overtook them—and trouble and sickness and death always held big liens on the early goldfields —Bob was there with his advice and help. The weak, while struggling with their weakness, and recognizing that they must yield, had a blind faith in Bob's power to rescue them from the consequence of their folly. The knavish also believed that Bob, if consulted in the terror of the moment, when the approach of Nemesis was expected, would never "put them away." He might advise restitution where restitution was possible; he hated sin, and he hated crime, sometimes more, sometimes less, than sin to which legal penalty attached, and he had no sympathy for the sinner when he was not a repented sinner. But his knowledge with the world, his potency with the mass, and with the constituted authorities of the district, were all at the service of any poor wretch who, law-hunted or remorse-driven, hungered for a city-refuge. The humble felt that Bob was an impregnable shield against the tyranny of self-created or state-created powers, while the latter, if not the former, well knew they had in him an efficacious ally in the preservation of order and the regulation of the township and its vicinage.

At the critical moment when Law ranged itself on the side of Injustice, and did its best to facili-

tate the success of the gang which jumped Ditchburn and party's claim in the very richest part of the lead, it was Bob who saved the resort to shooting-irons, and another Eureka affair, and brought the round dozen of troopers from the midst of the infuriated mob. It was Bob who suspected that the informalities in Ditchburn's papers were somehow connected with the circumstance that the leader of the jumpers was brother-in-law to the Commissioner's clerk, and who suggested to the said clerk that an immediate resignation might prevent the sudden dislocation of his neck. Who was it that freed young Spiffles, the brainless fool, fresh from a Liverpool counting-house, who, in an inebriated hour, had been married, not so much to as by one Liz, a lady upon whose reputation a dab of tar would have appeared, by contrast, nearly white, but Bob? Bob it was, again, who made Smithson, a cadet of a banking family, whose honours included hereditary legislative as well as financial trophies, marry the girl who had followed him from London in the desperation of her not wise love. And was it not the same all-round healer of wounds and redresser of grievances who, when Jock Lung's, the splitter's, five-year-old tot strayed from the hut at the base of the Grampians, organized and led the search parties, and was him-

self so long away that the parties were forming to search for him, when he re-appeared with the dead child in his arms? Was it not he, too, that washed the dead child and prepared it for its tiny grave, its mother the while lying in a death-like faint, and its father putting, with gentle "tap-tap," the roofing shingles together for the "little un's" coffin? And of course it was Bob, and no one else, the chap who came up when the February of '61 escort was stuck up near the Western, just as the troopers were getting the worst of it, and helped them to turn the tables and arrest the ringleaders. Apparently, too, the trifling circumstance that the same chap (in other words Bob) carried away on his shoulder from the scene of the attack one of the raiding party's bullets did not prevent him from exerting himself to obtain the ablest Melbourne constable—Aspinall, it was—in order that the raider's life might be spared from the gallows, not for the raider's sake exactly, but for that of the grey-haired old lady in Sydney, whose son of many prayers would have gone to a quicklime grave in Ballarat but for Bob.

"Half-Crown Bob," said old Pestle the Quaker chemist and official pluralist, "the worst I can say of him is that people rush into trouble on purpose that Bob can comfort 'em and help 'em out!"

And old Pestle, not that he was old, by any means—he was only big-brained and long-headed —was right. It was difficult—almost impossible —to get very intimate with Bob, unless one was in trouble. As a rule, the bigger the trouble the greater the intimacy.

There was one exception to this rule, however. That was in the case of delicately nurtured Locke, who fell home-sick, and hungered after his mother's and his sisters' caressing. He was boy enough to wish he could go home by the first vessel, but he was man enough to stick to his claim, in the hope that, when he did go, he would own the wherewithal to make life easier and brighter for the dear ones who were praying and dreaming of him by day and night.

Well, Locke was going mad, really mad, for want of some one to open his heart to. He went to Bob.

"What's the trouble, lad? Something wrong, I see," spoke out old Half-Crown at once.

When it came to the pinch, Locke could not confess there was nothing more wrong with him than home-sickness, so replied—

"Oh, nothing, Half-Crown; was passing and thought I'd see how you were. That's all!" and so he took himself off with his heart full. It was

Bob's shift at the windlass, and his mate had that moment signalled to haul, so he could not follow the lad to see what was really up, but he felt sure that he would know before long. And he did. Locke went his miserable way to his tent when a bright thought struck him. He would go and gamble with Palmetto Jack, the New Orleans cardsharper. He could not lose much; the English mail had gone the previous week, and had taken away all his net earnings to date; but still he had enough to lose to justify his returning to Bob and making a lament over his weakness, and his disregard of his mother's wish that he should never gamble. Palmetto Jack was soon found, and soon the ten-pennyweight nugget, and ounce of "dust," which represented Locke's work for the week, were transferred to that worthy per the agency of poker. It was very wrong and very weak of the lad, no doubt, and so Bob told him, when he confessed to gambling the same night; but what a glorious talk it caused, how skilfully the older man led the younger one on till the latter's heart was bared, and the innermost spring of his home-sickness at last welled forth in Bob's clear vision. And how intently did the lad (he was only twenty-one) listen, as dear Half-Crown urged him, as he valued his future here and his

future in the hereafter, to be true to his mother and his sisters.

"God alone knows," said Bob, "all that our women suffer on our account, the ceaseless agony of prayer, the dreadful humiliation and horror when we do wrong, the nameless fears that even when we do right we do it by accident and not by principle. The heaped-up sin of all the women who ever lived can be as nothing beside the pangs men have made women suffer in their pride and their recklessness and their evil-doing. Thank God, Locke, that you have such a woman to pray for you—three such women. If you don't win heaven with that help, you must be an infernal scamp. I have two——"

But here Half-Crown broke down, as no one on the Creek ever saw him before or after. Locke "cleared" then, and before he turned into his blankets that night he did what he had left undone for many a day. He said his prayers; and thanked God for his mothers and his sisters, and Bob. He did not pray to get his money back from the professor of poker; but he got it back for all that, for Palmetto Jack had an interview with Bob the next day, which left an impression on his mind that it would be the cheapest in the long run to refund his winnings.

He never had a chance to regain them, for Locke was afterwards watched by Bob closely, and Locke sometimes smiled to himself at thinking how cheaply he won Bob's intimacy. But the lad forgot that his trouble had been very big and very real at the time. Old Pestle, to whom in after years he told the story, understood perfectly well that the boy must have been in distress, and took the incident as additional evidence (though none was needed) in support of his own belief that people purposely plunged into trouble that they might be pulled out by Bob.

Old Pestle was never in trouble himself, but he emulated Bob in bearing as many of his neighbours' as he could, and thus had a sort of vicarious claim on Half-Crown's sympathy. He had a claim of his own upon Bob's intimacy, but this was quite unconnected with trouble (unless it was Bob's private sorrows), but he never cared to advance it.

How it arose was in this way. When Bob first came to the Creek, he was a store-hand and had no need to "register." He waited to look about a bit before he marked out his claim. When he put in his pegs old Pestle was acting as mining registrar—he was always "acting" something or other, was Pestle. "Old right?" queried the

acting-registrar. "Date out, and mislaid!" as laconically replied Bob. "Name?" once more queried the representative of the Government. Bob hesitated. Pestle looked up, and saw in Bob's face the reflection of a struggle between the disgrace of an *alias* and a desire to conceal his identity. "Call you Smith; no, too many Smiths already; Jones, Brown, Robinson, all the same fault. Haven't you a nickname?" For a Quaker Pestle had a very flexible tongue and keen apprehension. "Well," stammered Bob, "I have sometimes been called 'Half-Crown Bob!'" "That'll do—H. C. Bob!" And that's how old Pestle had a claim on Bob's intimacy and "all the privileges and rights appertaining thereto." Moreover, that's how it came about that when miners of an inquisitive sort thought they would satisfy themselves of Bob's real name by a glance at the register of his claim and "right," they received nothing for the shilling they had to disburse for permission to inspect the record but "H. C. Bob."

It used to be a favourite dodge played on new hands, when they were anxious, as they almost invariably were, about Bob's identity, for the oldsters to send them up to Pestle to look through the registers. The fellow who invented it subsequently courted Pestle's daughter and married her,

the freed cynics alleging that the only reason Pestle consented to the match being the number of shilling inspection fees he obtained through his prospective son-in-law's ready-wittedness.

The mystery surrounding Half-Crown was also a constant source of income to Pat Davey and other bar-keepers and shanty-owners. No new arrival thought he had done his duty to Bob and to himself till he had first shouted for the whole staff of the post-office, and plied them with questions and drink as to whether Bob ever got letters and papers, and if so, how they were addressed; or till he had fortified himself with liquor sufficient to float his courage to the point of saying to Bob something like this:—

"I say, Half-Crown, tell us how you got that queer name of yours; there must be a big yarn hanging to it—ain't there? And while you're about it, can't you tell us something about yourself, old man? You know, we think so much of you, we'd like to know all about you."

All this, of course, was very rude and very annoying, and if we were telling a fiction instead of a true story, we would make Bob rise up in wrath and retaliate on impertinent interrogator No. 1 with a revolver so effectually that there would be no impertinent interrogator No. 2.

Truth to tell, Bob did raise, not his revolver, but his eyebrows, the first time this kind of question was put to him, and felt somewhat vexed. It had become a habit with him in his self-communings to think quickly, and so he thought quickly now, and spoke slowly, where most men would have reversed the processes. And when he spoke he uttered the words: "You want to know all about me and my name, do you? Well, I don't think it would do you any good to tell you, and I'm certain it would make me feel bad, so you'll have to excuse me. But I don't mind telling you about my nick-name; that is, all I know—I can't tell you more, can I?" looking pleasantly up at the silent circle surrounding his hole. Then, after a pause, he resumed:—

"How I came to be called 'Half-Crown Bob' I don't know; who stood god-father I don't know; nor where it first stuck to me. But it fits me, and I'll tell you—it may do some of you fellows good—that I promised a dear lady in the old land, that till I succeeded in doing a certain thing, I would live upon half-a-crown a week, or as near thereto as possible. Now, boys, you know that few in this new country can make it possible to live upon half-a-crown a day, to say nothing of a week. But I've kept my promise in

the spirit if not to the letter. I've mentioned this thing once or twice before I came to the Creek, and I suppose my nickname came about through my doing so. That's all I can tell you!" And before any one could say anything, he had sprung out of his hole—very shallow it was then—and strode away to his tent.

The listeners turned from his claim, none breaking the silence, till a lanky cornstalk remarked that "that 'ere darned Grampian mist must be hanging about the camp, as it had got into his eyes;" an oracular utterance to which his comrades sniffed assent. By sniffing, instead of speaking, they perhaps thought to avert the penalty of lying, for the cornstalk most certainly didn't speak the truth about the mist. The summits of the Grampians, fourteen miles away, wore a sun-woven coronet that glittered and glanced in the pellucid blue of a summer sky. What mist there was in his eyes was due to Bob's few words, and the sinners knew it.

Bob's reply became historic. Every one in camp and township, up at the reefs at the east, down Commercial Street at the west, and along the full length of straggling Main Street, which was the connecting link between the Occident and the Orient, heard of it before ten o'clock that night,

and always remembered it afterwards. People the next time they saw Bob, noticed in him something more worthy of respect. At least, they fancied so; the truth was, they had learnt something from his words which had made them more capable of seeing the pure strength of his nature. And now was displayed a very curious thing. This heterogeneous mass became homogeneous where Bob was concerned.

Each of the thousands who heard of his reply that night seemed the next day to have come to regard it as a confidence made to himself or herself personally, and to only one or two mutual friends besides. They would talk about Bob to the new-comers that flocked to the field, sometimes at the rate of a score a day, sometimes by hundreds—once, when Chamber's flat lead was bottomed upon, the increase tallied into thousands. They would mysteriously hint at the mystery surrounding the man and his name; but the whetted curiosity of the immigrant, however ingeniously worded, would obtain no further insight into Half-Crown's affairs than the assurance that, if inquiry were made of Bob himself, he would tell a stranger just as much as the oldsters knew—which, of course, was no more and no less than the truth. Old Pestle, who, Quakerism not-

withstanding, was a social philosopher of the Herbert Spencer school, used in after years to include the promptitude with which the units of the current Creek population came to the conclusion that Bob's reply was for their ears only, as the most extraordinary of the many peculiar phenomena of goldfield life.

As for Bob himself, the question came so often afterwards, that he stereotyped, so to speak, his answer. He made one alteration, however, in its phrasing. For the "dear lady," a phrase too tender to pass his lips often, he substituted "a dear friend." But there was that in his tone which indicated the sex of the friend all the same. It was painfully wearisome to him, this questioning, but in time he saw that, through it, his influence spread, and he was wishful that his influence—which, not being a fool, he was aware made for truth and order—showed wider day by day. He thought, perhaps, that the wrong for which he suffered might be the sooner atoned for.

Why his influence should spread was, however, a problem which, being modest withal, he could not solve. It was a constant marvel to him, this dear old Half-Crown, that people should flock to him, do as he told them, love him. Being, as we said, not a fool, he knew they did these things;

but why—that he did not know. We know; it was because of the soul in his eyes.

THE STORY

"Come home, Robert, my son, at once. I want you badly. Life or death, come direct to the bank."

These were the words that met Bob Strathing's eyes as he tore open a telegram posted on from his latest Paris address to the Hôtel de Paris, Monte Carlo. Bob was standing in the Casino grounds at a spot overlooking the Mediterranean expanse when he read them. He had been handed his letters as he left the hotel for his morning stroll, but he delayed opening them till he could find a restful nook near the sea margent. He had only arrived the previous night, had at once visited the salon, and had lost more than he cared to remember. He had never played roulette before, but the proverbial luck of novices had not favoured him, so that it was upon a temper of which rage against luck, the bank, some disdain of himself, and the incipient thirst of the gambler for more play, that the contents of the telegram fell. Needless to say that when he had read it the temper was, if possible, a shade worse. For

the moment he remembered only the impossibility of getting his revenge from the bank, if he returned to London by the train leaving Nice that forenoon. But it was for the moment only. Bob had been spoilt somewhat by fortune. Never a reasonable wish, and many an unreasonable one, of his but what had been gratified by his indulgent parents. He was not so spoilt, however, that it ever entered his head to disobey his father's request. If the boy had nearly always got what he wanted from his father or mother, they had got from him in return what parents seldom seem to get now-a-days—implicit obedience, the most ardent love, and the most reverential worship. So it was that he did not stop to reason whether he should go back or not. There was no "making up his mind," though he felt it a relief to curse the fates that drove him homeward so soon. One glance at the scene, a never-to-be-forgotten glance, a scene to constantly reappear, mirage-like, before his vision in the torturing days to come, then away. He wondered, half audibly, as he booked to Paris, whether he should not take a return-ticket—he had not intended to go back by way of Paris, and coming thence, had purchased a single ticket only —for he promised himself a speedy return.

Little he thought then that his farewell to

Monte Carlo was the farewell to his care-free past, and the brightness and glory of existence! Some shadow of the future fell upon him, as, lying at his ease in the luxurious carriage, he re-perused the dispatch, and would not be removed. He noticed then, beneath the superfluous wording so foreign to the usual business-like brevity of his father's letters, the under-current of passionate entreaty, and blamed himself for his selfishness in not having seen it before.

"'Badly! life or death!' What does it all mean?" he pondered.

He could find no answer, cudgel his brains into even abnormal activity as he would. The gloom of the future rested on his spirit.

What the dispatch meant was clear enough to him, when, late in the afternoon of the second day from his departure from Nice, he walked into the principal's parlour of Messrs. Carlyon and Strathing, century-old bankers in Clement Lane. It meant ruin—and more than ruin—shame. He had left his father ten months before, apparently in the prime of life and the best of health, and good for another score years of a vigorous business career. He found him a half-palsied old man, with tottering feet and shaking hands, nerves that vibrated horribly at the slightest sound, and a piteous, oh,

so piteous a look on his face, the look of the hunted.

"Father!" that was all that Bob could exclaim. The horror of his father's aspect struck at his heart, and for his very life he could not have uttered another syllable.

"Robert, at last you have come. I wanted you so badly—so badly."

It was the same phrase as that in the telegram. Bob felt rather than remembered this much.

"Why?" He did not mean to be abrupt, but the horror still held a vice-like grip of his pulses and his voice.

And then Bob saw what never passed with him into the oblivion of the forgotten.

With a shriek that rang through the cushioned panels of the private office, through the cashier's room, and into the outer counting-house—fortunately the clerks had all gone home—Strathing senior flung himself at the feet of his boy, and clasped his knees.

"Robert, my son, my son, save me!" This was what the shriek carried to Bob's ears, from the poor gibbering lips, which had never previously spoken aught to him save in kindly raillery or loving counsel.

What mental power had not forsaken the

younger Strathing he sent to recall a story he had once heard of the paralysis of limbs and brain which seized the Alpine guides when they observed the signs of the awful approach of an avalanche. For a moment as it actually was, for an eternity as it seemed, he could not think of his father—he could only think of the avalanche.

It was not strange that he should lose sight for that moment of his father's agony. The avalanche was falling upon him and those he loved, and intervened between his eyes and the prostrate, shrinking form of the old man.

But why detail all the mystery and the horror of the next few hours? We will put into a few sentences what the elder Strathing told his son, or rather what the son, when he had somewhat recovered from the shock, dragged from his father.

Carlyon and Strathing (that is to say Strathing, for Carlyon had long since passed into the region of the Shades) were on the eve of failure. The morrow might see their credit "blown upon," their "paper" returned and their shutters up. But the failure was the least of the trouble, bitter though it was. The collapse would be attributed, and rightly, to the fraud of the principal. Strathing senior was indeed in imminent danger of living the short years remaining to him in a

felon's cell, and dying a felon. He had forged deeds, and stock, and merchandise warrants, and scrip transfers; he had appropriated trust moneys and deposits in the attempt to temporarily make good the deficiency in the bank's capital caused by loss on the Stock Exchange and irregular mining speculation. It was the old story told yet once again, this time with the difference, however, that it was not a trusted servant who was the defrauder, but the head of the firm.

Aroused cupidity, the brilliant prospects offered by an "unusually good thing," a loss, then further speculation to retrieve the damage only leading to other losses, the wrong act which was to operate for one day only and was to be corrected the next, the frantic struggling to keep the head above water as the speed of the infernal maelstrom increased—there is no need to recapitulate the characteristics of the perpetually recurring history. Suffice it to say that the ruin of Carlyon and Strathing appeared complete. Only one thing could avert it—the help of a certain old friend. But it was useless to expect his assistance if it were known that it was the "chief" himself that was guilty. Nor under any circumstances, to such a pass had the affairs of the bank been brought, would it be possible to prevent publicity being

given to the peculiarity, not to say criminality, of some of the firm's late transactions.

This was, in effect, the revelation of the elder Strathing to the younger. This was the shameful ruin which Bob had read in his father's face on his entrance into the bank parlour.

When the whole story was out, sobbed forth by the wretched banker as he lay on the floor, for he could not get up, and Bob had to crouch beside him to listen, there was silence for a time in the fast-darkening room. The noise of the street traffic, never very loud in slow-going Clement Lane, was almost inaudible. The murmur somehow resolved itself into the plash of the Mediterranean wave on the Monte Carlo beach. The sea monody melted in its turn into the waltz strains rippling from the piano standing in the old drawing-room at Kensington, and Bob pulled his wits together just in time to save himself from falling into the unconsciousness which had already mercifully enwrapped the old man. The house-porter, a life-long dependent of the bank, came, and, wondering at the presence so long after hours of "the two masters," asked whether he should light the gas. No; no lights were wanted yet. Bob had loosened his father's old style neck-cloth, and had placed a sofa cushion under the grey

head, and the old man's regular breathing indicated that he had passed from his faint into sleep. Bob would have liked the lights so as to have studied the old man's face; but he would not have them, because he did not care to see his own features, in the mirror which filled one of the wall panels. Poor fellow, he hated to learn the change which he felt had been wrought in him.

Years after, as old Pestle stood at the shaft's mouth, and reverently closed Bob's eyes, from which the life-light had vanished, he said—"When I first saw his eyes I felt that they had not been placed so. I believed they had been driven in by the awfulness of something that he had seen unexpectedly." Old Pestle was right, though there was nobody to tell him so. Bob's eyes were driven in that night by the dreadfulness of what he saw.

This is what he saw:—

His still loved and hitherto honoured father there prostrated, humiliated and disgraced. His darling mother—not as he had seen her last with her unbent form and hair unsilvered; her smile, that was unto those whom she cherished as a perpetual benison—crushed, withered, shrinking, weeping for the grave in which to rest her suddenly whitened locks, before her time. One other woman, dearer perhaps than the one who bore

him, though not yet nearer, whose placid face had shone always for him, with the serene purity of a love that had nothing, he used to fancy, earthly in it, stricken with the storm also, with her hopes wrecked and her happiness blasted. These figures he saw; the one in sad actualness of place and time, the others in imagination scarcely less real. And himself—he feared to study the reflection of his features in the glass; but he did not spare his feelings as he gazed at his future. He realized that all was over in life for him; and the magnificent vistas opened before him by his education, by his social standing, and the position of junior partner in the bank, which in the course of the next year was to have been his, had been closed with an impenetrable seal. He saw himself at the threshold of his manhood burdened with a tainted name and carrying it through all the weary time.

No wedding now with the stately woman with the placid smile; he would be married to infamy "till death did them part."

For Bob had understood, without being expressly told so by his father, the thought in the latter's mind which had prompted the cry, "Save me, my son, save me!" His father had determined to make him the scapegoat for his crimes. His

quasi-connection with the firm would enable this to be done readily. Two years before, immediately on leaving the University, Bob had taken a place in the bank counting-house, in order to obtain that practical insight into affairs necessary to qualify him for the assumption, sooner or later, of its management. He had proved himself to possess all the family aptitude for finance, and had shown such capacity that, towards the middle of the second year, his father had given him control of the stock and foreign loan transactions. Bob worked as few would have worked in his position. He took no advantage from his kinship with the "chief," and spared himself none of the routine drudgery. It was not so much a principle as a constitutional habit with him to do whatever fell to his hand with all his might. Thus it came about that at the close of his second year's probation, he knew as much of the intricate lore of the financial world as some men with ten times his experience. But his father had said that he was young enough to buckle on business harness, and had wished that he should spend a twelvemonth in travel before finally taking up his position in the bank.

Two months only of his holiday remained unexpired, when he had determined to run through

Southern Europe, but he had got no further than the "hell" regions. He had seen "life" of course during his University terms and his travel. The world had left, however, few stains on his naturally strong and upright nature. He had backed a horse or two, and had gambled a little in other ways—we have seen him at Monte Carlo—but he had lost nothing he was not able to afford. With women he had always been tender and courteous and pure—the memory of the two women at home was a perfect Sir Galahad's shield to him always. He had helped many a friend and had deceived none. Picture yourself, then, as this young fellow, conscious of fair powers, conscious also of their limitations, perceiving countless opportunities for usefulness and honourable exertion, with an assured position in both the money-making and the money-spending worlds, and then picture yourself as him once more, when he realized that he was to be a perpetual bedfellow with shame. And if your self-portraiture be correctly drawn, you will, perhaps, taste a thousandth part of the agony that bit into Bob's heart and brain, and filled his veins as he sat there with the dreary nightfall closing upon him.

How long he sat, how long his father lay at his feet, how he got the old man—still unconscious—

and himself into a cab, how they got home to Kensington, and at what hour, Bob never could remember. His perceptions revived only at the sound of his mother's voice.

"Robert, what does all this mean?" she wailed. "I have been nearly mad with the sense of ill, but he would tell me nothing, nor would he let me send for you. It is nothing that you have done, my boy, is it? Oh, say no!"

True and loyal soul, that for thirty years had believed she was possessed of the every thought of the bosom on which she nightly rested, it was not likely that she would ever doubt her husband. If trouble came, therefore, it must be through some one else, and the horrid fear had laid hold upon her that, from witnessing how her husband had withered under the blow, whatever it was, it must be connected with Bob. She strove to drive away the fearful suspicion, but it would not vanish. Her question, and the wholly eager, half suspicious glance that accompanied it, hurled upon her son the awfulness of his position. To give her the denial she craved, which his conscience warranted him in doing, would be really to thrust the ignominy of guilt upon his father. He would be the actual accuser of his father to his mother, for the old man had evidently not taken her into his

confidence. To evade the question would be as bad as to reply in the affirmative, even if his mother would be content with less than a direct answer. And to say yes, while it might save his father, yet was it not to plant a fatal sting in the wounded mother's heart, and to do himself a vital injury? But if he was to do as his father wished, if he was to obey the unspoken command, "Yes," it must be, and "Yes" it was—not without a weak attempt at temporizing, however.

A doctor had been sent for, and had said that Mr. Strathing was in no danger, but had simply fainted.

"Wait till father comes to, mother darling, and I will tell you all."

"Robert, I must know now; Lois will watch your father."

And he then saw Lois for the first time. His father had been laid on a couch in the drawing-room, and by his head, bathing it with a cool lotion, stood stately Lois.

"Tell her all, Rob! You do not know how she has suffered these last days. Tell her all, and let her know the worst."

As Lois, the home-angel, as old Strathing had once called her, spoke, she did not lift her eyes, bent as they were in the performance of their

tender task. Lois, as ever faithful to her own instincts and to her gracious training, put herself nowhere. She had suffered almost as acutely as Mrs. Strathing since the change in the banker's appearance and manner indicated calamity; but it was, "Tell her, for she has suffered," not "Tell us, for we have suffered."

Still Bob temporized—partly from the dread of the revelation, partly from the hope that his father would regain consciousness, and himself take up the miserable story.

"I have been travelling night and day, mother darling, since I got the dad's wire, and must have rest and food. I have eaten nothing to-day, I will tell you by and by."

"Robert," again spoke Lois. He started at the name; he had been "Rob" to her since the day when, fifteen years before, he had kissed her a boyish welcome to his home, which she had entered as a legacy—the only one the poor woman had to leave—to Mrs. Strathing from a widowed friend.

"Robert, your mother has scarcely touched food for three days, nor has she slept."

Bob now looked on his mother's face. He had purposely avoided doing so before. For half a century had time passed by, and left no finger-

touch upon her cheek and forehead, fanned no devastating breath upon her hair. In all these years she had never been acquainted with personal sorrow. Ephemeral cares about her husband and son, or Lois, her adopted daughter, filled every niche of her heart not occupied by nearer ones; the troubles of her friends, or her dependents—these had been all her burdens.

But time had not forgotten, but had only postponed, the collection of the tribute of grief, which she, like every other creature of woman born, must pay him. In three days she had changed more in aspect than in all the blest years of her girlhood and wedded life. The suspense, the dread of she knew not what, which burdened her during that brief space had bleached her hair, and seared her brow and cheek. As Bob had seen her in his delirious gaze into the future in the bank parlour, so he saw her now—suddenly aged.

"God!" was the unexpressed prayer, "for one moment with Lois to tell which is best—kill my mother's hopes in me, or her wedded faith in father!"

God seemed silent then, as He did for many a day afterwards to all Bob's prayers, expressed and unexpressed. Lois still stooped over his father's

form, and his mother stood before him waiting, waiting.

Yes, he would tell her; surely his father would right him with those dear ones, whatsoever he might let the outside world suspect. "Since you will have it so, mother and Lois, listen. The bank is on the point of failure, and I—I am to blame. I—" no, he could not say "robbed"—"I abused my trust." Had the words been those of confession, they could not have been spoken with more stricken pain. Bob did not recognize his own voice.

"Robert, my son, my son!" No accent of reproach in the mournful wail, no tinge of regret for the lost wealth; only measureless sorrow for the broken idol worshipped so devotedly by the mother and father, for the stricken ideals and the desolated hopes. Sick almost unto death as the young man felt, wrapped inextricably in the entanglements of the fate-woven net, he was glorified for the moment by the glimpse he got in that passionate exclamation of the heaven that awaited him when the great mother-love was informed of all. There was the utterest misery in her words then; there would be the fullest joy when she learnt the whole truth, even though the joy was bought at the sacrifice of faith in her

husband. There was a reward there, at all events, for his present suffering.

And Lois? She was mute. She but bent the lower over the grey head on the couch-pillow, and stopped not in her loving ministrations. But she knew that she had received a blow beside which the grasp of death itself would have been welcome. The almost daily intimacy of the family circle in which Bob and Lois had grown up had not prevented the growth of the purest affection between them. As a boy, Bob had sworn fealty to her; through his youth and to the present time he had kept it; and but for this terrible thing, the "little wife" of his early days was to have become the wedded wife of his manhood. She had been his confidant always, his guide, she thought, always also. And this was what it had come to! Lois was no coward. Never a nobler or more courageous heart beat within womanly shape than hers, but she cried in the anguish of the sudden revelation that she might die then. She did not shrink from the overwhelming wave of trouble. She recoiled from the sin.

Only the stertorous breathing of the old man disturbed the stillness. Bob stood in the centre of the room when he had spoken. His mother had fallen coweringly into an easy-chair.

"Will you not speak to me, Lois?" at length asked Bob. He wanted her to look up, and hoped that she would read that in his gaze which might tell her something of the truth.

"Oh, Rob, what can I say? God help us all, you most of all!" Still she would not turn round.

"Then, you——" he would have added, "believe me guilty," but he stopped himself in time. Why should not she believe him? Had he not virtually confessed?

"Then, what? I do not understand," she said, having waited a moment for him to conclude.

"Then you have nothing to say to me. Have I already fallen so low in your opinion as that?"

"Rob, you are unjust," she murmured in broken tones, raising her head now, but not venturing to glance at his face. "It is all so sudden—so awful. I have no time to think."

She had endeavoured to speak with her ordinary evenness of tone, but the effort was too much for her.

"Oh, Rob, my own love, how could you do it?" she cried between tearless sobs that rent her being. "How could you, when we all loved you so? We would have sacrificed our lives for you, everything to have prevented this wrong."

"And then——"

"But we do not love him less for this sin, do we, mother?"

From the depths of the chair there came a passionate echo—

"We do not love him less. More we could not have loved him. That is why it is so hard. Why did you do it, my son? If you had only trusted me!"

Once more Bob was nearly telling all. In the solitude of the bank parlour he had faced the consequences of taking upon himself the burden of shame. He had calculated upon meeting the scorn of some his whilom companions, and the pity of others; he had tortured himself so far as to frame the words a judge would use in sentencing him, supposing he had to stand his trial, and was convicted; he had stung himself, too, with the fancied reproaches of those two loving women, but he had not bargained to suffer so much. Inconceivably more than the pain he had imagined was the reality. The grief of his mother and Lois filled his brain; his reason reeled under the injustice.

"Mother! Lois!" he cried, "have patience and you shall know everything. Do not judge me so hastily, for I am not——"

"Where am I? Robert, are you there?" came a feeble voice from the couch, just in time to remind Bob that he must say no more.

"You are at home, father, in the drawing-room. We are all here—mother, Lois, and I. You have been ill, taken with a fit or something of that sort, at the bank. Lie quiet, dear dad, and you will be better presently," and Bob, as he spoke, moved to his father's side, and took Lois' place. Mrs. Strathing rose from her chair, and also knelt by the old man, directing upon him a gaze in which nothing was visible but loving solicitude. What wonderful powers of repression some good women possess! A few moments before, and Mrs. Strathing's nature had undergone a momentous convulsion, but she showed nothing of its effects to her husband. In that supreme moment of wretchedness she could find no reason why she should deviate from her rule—to put her husband first, and herself last.

"Are you better, Edward?" she said, laying her hand on his brow. "Nay, dear, do not get up; you must not stir yet."

The old man had moved at her touch, and she thought he was attempting to rise. He meant, however, to turn his face to the wall. He could not meet her eyes, veiled as they were in a mist of

tears. He made no response to her murmured inquiry. They believed that he had relapsed into unconsciousness. The seconds passed into minutes and the minutes into quarter hours before any one broke the oppressive silence.

"You have not dined, Robert, did you not say?" then questioned Mrs. Strathing. "You must not go longer without food."

Her voice seemed to rouse the banker. "I want to speak to Robert, he must not go away."

Mrs. Strathing feared that her husband's reproaches were about to burst on Bob. If she could only have known! With soothing words and caressing touch, she begged the old man to postpone what he had to say till his strength returned.

Without glancing at her, he motioned for her and Lois to go away, and for his son to come nearer. The ladies obeyed the gesture, and imagined that the banker still wished to save them from the knowledge of Bob's conduct.

"Robert," the old man whispered, clasping with his weak arms his son's neck, so to bring the curly head close to the lips which trembled in the utterance, less from his powerlessness than his terror, "you have not told them?" The searching scrutiny of his father's look told Bob what he had not yet cared to admit to himself—that his

mother and Lois were to be kept in ignorance, then and always, of the truth.

Bob, with his whole spirit revolting at the foulness of the wrong which was being done to him, could not answer him at once. His passion, scarcely held in check by his filial affection for his father, choked his speech. At last he found words. Freeing himself from the old man's hold, he said, "I have told them all!" For his life he could not help playing with his father's agony for that moment.

"All?" the old man groaned and shivered.

At the sound the ladies at the end of the room started forward.

Bob's natural greatness of heart spurred him to complete the sacrifice. "I mean, all that you would have them know—that the bank may fail, and that I have caused the smash," he hurriedly whispered.

Both Mrs. Strathing and Lois caught, and wondered at, the glance of gratitude the old man cast upon his son. They did not hear the half-inaudible exclamation—"It would kill Madeline to know all!" else they would have wondered the more. Long years afterwards they remembered the look—and then, when it was too late, remembered its significance.

"I will see you the first thing in the morning,

father," said Bob. "You must not talk any more to-night." The banker acquiescing, Bob proceeded to his own room, faint in body, for he had fasted long, and was sick at heart. For the first time in his life beneath the home roof, he went to bed without his mother's kiss and the gentle pressure of Lois' hand.

The ladies busied themselves about the old man, and Bob would not make the first approach. He could not bear to have his customary caress received coldly, and he fancied that, as they believed him to be the one responsible for the present bitterness, they could not help but treat him with some severity. Poor Bob! How in his novitiate of suffering could he understand that both were hungering to enfold him in their arms, weep over him, and, it might be, purify his soul from the sin they suspected in him, by sweet drops from the chalice of their grief?

Sleep, calm and restful, did not abide with the Strathing family that night, nor, indeed, for many nights subsequently.

Scarcely had the day broke when the banker, weak and trembling, found himself in his son's room. Bob was waiting for him already dressed. The latter was the first to speak. He tried to make his words as tender as possible.

"There is no way out of this horrible mess then, father, but that I must bear the brunt of these—blunders?"

"Let us be frank, Robert, now. If I had been frank before there would have been no trouble. God forgive me. When you said blunders, you meant crimes. Call them so."

The banker spoke in the quavering accents of a coward.

"Let that pass, sir," and Bob, as he replied, felt springing up within him a contempt for his father which lent a sting to his next words. "We have no time to lose. If I am to figure as a criminal, it is just as well I should begin to study the part."

"For your mother's sake, Robert, spare me, though I deserve all."

"You said you wanted us to be frank with one another, sir. You can hardly expect me to take up willingly this load of disgrace. But I will say no more—for the sake of her you have just invoked. It is for her I do it all." And then his mood changed, and the remembrance of his father's countless past kindnesses rose up before him.

"No, I don't mean that, father. I would do it for you as well, for everything I have and am came from you, and is yours if you want it. But

it is very hard, father, very hard, and you will not let me tell even Lois. This is the cruellest of all —that my mother and Lois should misjudge me."

"Boy, boy, every word you say is a knife thrust into my heart. But if you tell Lois she will not let your mother remain ignorant. She has only the attachment of an affectionate friend for me, for your mother she has the devotion of a daughter, and to you she bears all the love of a wife. She will not let you, her almost husband, be wrongfully blamed by your mother. She will not allow a shadow to remain between the two people she loves best on earth."

"You forget, father, that Lois owes you everything, and you are not right in saying she regards you merely as a friend. She has for you all the fondness of a daughter. Let me tell Lois."

"To tell Lois, I say, will be to tell your mother. Rather than that the whole world shall know. It is bad enough for your mother to think you are to blame. All night long she has been tossing on her bed crying 'My son! my son!' But for her to learn that I am the cause!" The old man in his terror and remorse became inarticulate.

"Be it so, then, sir." Bob's voice again unconsciously assumed severity of tone, and he could not use the "father." "I am to suffer to the

bitter end. I have to face the world as guilty. That I will do. I have to face mother and Lois as guilty. That I must do. But I can never marry Lois while this stigma clings to me. Never to be righted. Oh, my God!"

"I will right you, Robert—when I get into smooth waters again—at least with your mother and our dear girl." With the readiness of the weak drowning in the waters of disaster to grasp anything promising safety, the banker seized and flung this straw of consolation to his son.

"How could you do that? It would but add to the shock to know that you had consented to my bearing the consequences of the wrong. Lois might be told perhaps, but never mother, and then only in case mother died. But tell me what has to be done. If the bank has to be saved I must know how."

We need not follow Strathing senior and junior in their conference. As it proceeded the younger man saw that it would be only too easy a matter for him to appear as the perpetrator of the fraudulent acts. The fatal bonds adapted themselves with facility to his form. His functions during the major portion of his two years of bank service dove-tailed as it were into the frauds with fearful accuracy. So apparent indeed was the precision

with which the frauds could be adjusted to his work, that more than once the suspicion arose in his mind that in all his bank labours his father had used him as his tool. In this he was wrong. It was in fact that very circumstance which first suggested to the banker the idea that he might save himself and the bank by placing shameful responsibility on the shoulders of his son. He said as much to Bob, and in such a way that the young man did his wretched parent the justice of believing him.

Had it been clear to him that the banker had used his integrity, his innocence of the world, and his relationship as so many factors in his fraudulent calculations, the young man's love for his father would have been utterly destroyed, and with it would have gone most of that faith in God and man which proved his salvation in the dark hours to come.

As Bob was "to bear the brunt," so had he, in that conversation between himself and his father, to do all the thinking. All the subsequent actions, too, would have fallen to his lot had it been possible. The elder Strathing was one of those slender-fibred men who neither bend nor break before the storms of adversity, but who are simply laid low and crushed to the verge of annihilation.

He had been intellectually flattened out by the disaster that menaced his position in the world. The powers of the intellect and the financial grasp which had enabled him so to deal with securities as to make the "Strathing frauds" notorious on the Stock Exchange as models of nefarious cunning and perverted ingenuity had vanished in the intensity of his dread.

The result of the deliberations between father and son was that application was made to the former's old friend for a sufficient sum to meet the most pressing claims and to release the minor forged or misapplied securities. To obtain the money, as no security could be given by the firm, and the amount was lent from motives of pure friendship, it was necessary to furnish the lender with a statement of the bank's accounts. It was the wretched task of the old man to do this. He had then to pose as the accuser of his son as the one guilty of the frauds which had shaken the old house of Carlyon and Strathing to the foundations.

As it was tolerably clear that, given time and adherence to the beaten paths of finance, the firm would reach solvency again, the money was got.

Not so easily satisfied were the claims of the holders of the valueless bonds and deeds representing large amounts. These were for the most part

firms in the first rank of financial magnates, who would sooner lose a few thousands than allow a forger or manipulator of securities to go unexposed and unpunished. The suspicions of more than one of them as to the validity of some of the documents held to cover advances to the Strathings were roused, and inquiries at the brokers and the Stock Exchange were not as a rule reassuring. In several cases where loans had to be renewed an extension of time was not procurable till Mr. Strathing confessed that the securities were forged and asserted that the criminal was his son. A prosecution was only averted from pity for the father. Heinous as was the banker's sin, it was bitterly punished by the torture to which he was subjected in making these false confessions, and in listening, he, the real offender, to the commiserations lavished upon him because of the actions of his unworthy offspring.

Again and again would the old man have told the whole truth but for the recollection of his wife. Though legal process was not taken against Bob, there were few people in financial circles who were not aware of the serious accusations levelled against him; bank walls have ears, and repeat what they hear sometimes, and the tongues of bank and brokers' clerks will wag. To the bank, hitherto of

unimpeachable credit, many a kindly act was tendered when it leaked out that only time was requisite for it to pull through the crisis. For the old man and the family, unlimited sympathy, as genuine as boundless, but for Bob only merciless contempt and scorn. To his own intimates he was the most corrupt of whitened sepulchres, and "with such a father, such a mother, such a woman for his betrothed, and such prospects, to do this! Faugh!" For the persons who knew him slightly or not at all, it was the cause of much righteous indignation that the authorities had been so culpable as not to call him to account. It would have been a mercy to his parents to have locked him up for fourteen years at Portland, to say nothing of the relief to society. True, there was pity for Bob outside of his home, but it was confined to the clerks and the other servants of the bank. They did not suspect the father, but they could not bring themselves to suspect the son, much less find him guilty. For he had worked with them side by side, and there was not one of them but whose work when in arrears he had helped to perform. Not one but who had felt all the better for his kindly words and cheery laugh. But their opinion didn't count.

And Bob? During the progress of the negotia-

tions for settling the affairs of the bank, he had remained at home, going out at night only to the bank to help his father there, or for a stroll for health's sake. His was the controlling will while the whole dreary business was afoot. He guided his father's actions, prompted him here, and checked him there, so as to secure coherency between the facts as they were and what had to be shown as facts to others. It was well for him that the task was so great as to demand his utmost energies. He was left no time to brood. In his leisure he prepared himself resolutely, so far as he could do mentally, to meet the altered world. Very altered was it to him. He had insisted upon his father telling him what people said; he had done the same with the old confidential clerk and cashier, with whom he had to hold many conferences—so that he knew well how he was regarded. Altered particularly to him was the spot which had been his world—his home. His mother and Lois were still affectionate and tender towards him, but there was a change. They thought it was in him, he thought it was in them. He saw them seldom, his meals were served in his own rooms. Once his mother had tried to gain his confidence, but there could be no confidence given because of the wall erected

between them by his father's appeal. Then the poor woman sought Lois' aid, though she writhed at the need of the help of another to unlock her boy's heart. But Lois was no more successful. She conjured him by his love for her, by the memory of their youth and their early friendship, to treat her again as his old-time confidant. He was kind but he was resolute. He would tell her nothing. The dear women had bewailed to the banker their failure. How he suffered as they told him! They besought him in his daily consultations with Bob, to beg him to be frank and open with them. As to the actual details they knew next to nothing. They understood more or less vaguely that somehow Bob had robbed the bank, and had all but caused its collapse, but that was all. Why he had done so, they did not know, could not imagine. "Could it be caused by gambling debts?" questioned the mother of the banker. "Was it not at Monte Carlo your message found him?" Her husband dare not trust himself to reply; he could only shake his head. Others outside, who were curious to know what the young fellow had done with the money, were quite sure it was gambling that had ruined Strathing junior. The few hours and the few rouleaux he had spent at Monte Carlo were respectively magnified a

thousandfold. If his first game at roulette had not played havoc with Bob's purse, it had put the finishing touch to his reputation.

When all was settled, when the last forged deed and scrip had been redeemed, and the last penny of the misappropriated trust moneys replaced, and the apparently uninjured craft of Carlyon and Strathing's bank in a fair way to reach the haven of financial security, Bob told his father he had determined to go to Australia. The gold-diggings, though nearly ten years had elapsed since their discovery, were still always in men's minds, and Bob considered he might as well go there as anywhere. His decision surprised and shocked the banker. In the midst of the complications from which his son had freed him, he had never bestowed a thought on that son's future.

"You must not go away, Robert," he exclaimed. "What will become of the bank supposing I take ill or die? I am not the man I was before this trouble—before I did so wrong."

Mr. Strathing was very humble now. Unlike most sinners, once the fear of a dread penalty was removed, he did not forget his offence. He was morbidly sensitive to it when by himself or with Bob; hence the amendment of his phrase. He

feared to speak of his wrong-doing too generally or impersonally.

"What good can I do by staying?" was his son's rejoinder. "I can't go to the bank, my presence would injure it. You must take a partner; his money will free you from your liability to Wilson; why not take Wilson's son in?" Mr. Wilson was the name of the old friend of Mr. Strathing who had advanced him the large sum without security. "He is young and able, and will soon pick up the running."

"I had never dreamt of this," continued the old man. "I had thought that after a time you would have taken your place in the bank as if nothing had happened."

"Sir, don't talk in this way, to other business men, I mean; I say it with all respect. If you do, they will suspect that the blow has weakened your judgment permanently. You must know how such an impression would damage the bank."

There was a pause, and then Bob resumed passionately—

"Besides, father,"—the banker's eyes dimmed over, the young man had for the first time since the interview in the bedroom so addressed him,—"I could not stand it. Let me think of myself now a little. I have considered you up to

the present. Imagine what it would be for me to be seen about the city, pointed at, sneered at, congratulated perhaps on my narrow escape from a felon's cell."

"Robert, you are merciless, but I deserve it all."

"Nay, father, I did not mean to be unkind. I did not measure my words, and I beg your pardon."

"That is worse than all; it is I that should beg your pardon hourly, momentarily."

"Enough of this, father! You will see I cannot stop here."

"But your mother and Lois! They cannot bear the separation."

"Are we not separated now, as far as the Poles, because—— You will make me speak against my will, when my words must be so many dagger-stabs in your heart."

"Never mind me, my son, it is but just punishment."

"God knows, I have no wish to punish you. All I say is, that because my words give you pain is another reason for my going. For me to stay would be for you to have a thorn constantly in your side. I must go. Will you tell mother and Lois?"

"If you say I must, I will do so," murmured, in broken tones, the heart-wrung old man.

"And you must tell Lois, too, that I give her back her freedom." The poor fellow had steeled himself to tell this to herself, but his courage had failed him.

"Oh, Robert, there is no need for that. Lois loves you as ever—nay, with a deeper love if possible."

"I shall never marry. I would have none but Lois, and Lois would not have me as I am."

"Have you as you are? No woman alive is worthy of you as you are, Robert; and of all women unmarried Lois is the worthiest." The banker had told Bob he was merciless; he was merciless to himself as he continued—

"Lois would take you as you seem, and then when the moment comes when I can right you, think of the worship and the adoration that will be yours."

"We have discussed this point before, father, and uselessly. Lois must not be told till mother is dead, and pray heaven she may live for twenty years yet. I will not marry Lois till I am cleared, and we must not ask her to wait without knowing for what till the best years of her life are past. She must be—she shall be free!"

Decisively as Bob pronounced the words, his form shook with noiseless sobs. His father

was even more stirred by the violence of his emotion.

"The *Champion of the Seas* sails for Melbourne in a week, father. I shall leave by her. Will you tell mother at once, please?"

"I will if you insist, Robert. You have the right to command now, my place is to obey," answered Mr. Strathing sadly.

He did as he promised. Heaviest of all the strokes that had yet fallen on him was his wife's tearless grief when he communicated their son's resolve to her. She had aged greatly these latter weeks, but this last announcement transformed her into an old woman.

As for Lois, when the banker told her what Bob had said, she made no response, but received the news so apathetically that the old man wondered whether the desolation of spirit had not previously reached its extreme. He had determined in his own mind to beg her to refuse the offered release from her betrothal vow. When the time came, however, he was powerless to put his entreaty into words. And it was as well for his own sake that he was incapacitated. So close were the girl's tears to the surface, so near to overflowing the pent-up forces of her violated hopes and disappointed love, that at another word she would

have broken down utterly. The old man's burden would have been too heavy to have been borne, had he witnessed her agony. Shattered himself beyond further endurance, he could not have helped but tell her all, and that her hero, her Bob, was as pure and strong as she had once dreamed him.

Neither Mrs. Strathing nor Lois attempted to persuade their dear lad, never so dear as now, from carrying out his intention. They were in doubt whether he was not acting wisely after all. On the ground of health alone, his decision seemed best. His strength had gone; his physique modified; while his face, so changed had it become, might have been ravaged by a decade of disease. In any case, the barrier between them seemed to grow higher as the day of departure drew nearer. They said little to one another of the impending step and less to Robert. But all their waking moments—and they gave few to sleep that week—were spent in his service, preparing for his departure, weaving in with their work myriad prayers, and sanctifying their work with the blessed incense of their sighs and tears.

The night before Bob's departure arrived. Happy the family that in its homely annals knows not such experience as the last night

before the change in the old order of domestic things.

The last dinner together was a very quiet one. Only, towards the end Bob said with his old tenderness of intonation, "Mother darling, a few words with you in your own room?"

"My boy, yes!" All the wrung mother's heart went forth to him in the simple phrase.

"Lois, dear—after mother?" As he spoke he put all his fearless frankness, latterly hidden under compulsion, into the gaze with which he sought his erstwhile sweetheart's face. She dared not return the look as she motioned assent.

In the life of every human being there are arcana that may not be unveiled, experiences that may not be narrated. There were in that last interview between Mrs. Strathing and her son such unrevealable mysteries. There was the mother moaning with instinctive rebellion against the loss of her boy, fearing to keep him, yet still more fearing to separate from him; all her faculties clouded with the horrid misapprehension as to the young man's guilt, hating to reproach him, but craving with a longing the intensest to beg him to walk so in the future that neither God nor man should find aught to censure in him. There was the son, rocked with tumultuous

passions to which, if he is not to plant deeper stings than those he plucks out, he must not give expression, bleeding inwardly from the wound his mother unconsciously dealt him by her every word and gesture, yet not daring to raise his voice in vindication, suffering the more because with respect to himself alone the acuteness of her sorrow was so unnecessary. And over them both, bearing them down, accentuating with despair every syllable and caressing movement, the certainty—derived whence they knew not—that when they parted they would never meet on earth again. When Bob at last wrenched himself from his mother's arms, he left her fainting on the couch. It was with salt drops blinding his vision that he sought Lois.

He found her in the garden. The Strathings' house stood in the midst of its own grounds, small in area, but fertile in the beauty which still clings to many homes in the Old Court suburb.

It was a moonlight night in June. One of the poet's "rare days," when

> "Heaven tries the earth, if it be in tune,
> And over it softly her warm ear lays,"

had been succeeded by an equally perfect night. A vagrant breeze, in which lingered a reminis-

cence of the day's heat, now and then stirred the sleeping flowers, whispered cooingly through the streets, and irresolutely dallied with the creepers mantling the walls. The rustle of the leaves as the tiny breath played with them was the only sound distinctly audible. Nature preached peace, and Lois, as she stood in the centre of the oval lawn, whereon the moon had showered her most brilliant light till it resembled the argillaceous shield of some giant knight, wondered why men could work such wrong as to dull their ears to so gracious a sermon. It was a scene for lovers to confess mutual love, and to murmur vows—not for the indulgence of protests against the devastating fates, that, breaking hearts, yet compels them to continue their pulsing.

"Lois," said Bob softly, so as not to startle her, "shall we speak here? No one can overhear us, and I would like our last talk to take place where we have held so many sweet ones." He had not intended to make so tender a reference to the past, but the charm of the night betrayed him.

"I had the same thought, Rob," replied Lois, in quiet tones, the tremulousness of which was barely perceptible even to Bob's intent hearing.

The young man looked at her with the dreamy light enwrapping, as with a filmy garment, her

statuesque beauty. He drank in with his glance the sweet stillness of her eyes, and the refined grace of her features. He thought he had never seen her appear so beautiful, and yet he was to lose her for always. He had not ventured to take her hand.

"Lois, you have been dwelling upon the delightful past? Forgive me, dear, for alluding to these times, but I must in this—last hour."

He faltered, but forced himself to continue—

"Why I do so is to say this, that whatever you may think me now, I was then, if not worthy of you—no one could be that, I, perhaps, less than most—but at all events not absolutely unworthy of you. Believe that of me always, will you?"

This was more than the girl could bear.

"Rob," she cried, burying her face in her hands, "if I think of those days, don't let us talk of them. Let the past be dead, dear, if not to speech, to memory. Let us talk of the future. But I will think of you as you were when you first came from college—if I can."

Her honest soul would not let her withhold the final words, but as she had unconsciously lowered her voice, they passed unheard by Bob.

"Ah, Lois! I shall be the better for all the rest

of my days for knowing that. And now, dear, for my future."

He tried to be cheerful as he spoke, but miserably failed.

"Father gave you my message?" he at length asked.

"Oh, Rob!" the words struggled through a storm of weeping, "that must not be, unless——" She could not end the sentence.

"Unless what, Lois? Nay, never mind. You must be free. You could never marry a man upon whom so foul a stain rests."

"Is it that you do not care for me, or care for me less, Rob?"

"Before heaven, no! I have no right now to say one word of love to you, other than what I might utter to a sister, perhaps not that—but—but, if you could only read my heart!"

"Then I shall not give you back your promise. I shall look upon you always as my affianced husband."

Never before did the deep liquidity of her voice move Bob as it did now.

"I cannot accept the sacrifice, Lois—noble Lois. I should be an utter wretch to refuse you your freedom."

"I will not have it, Rob!" And with a gesture

full of delicacy, as if she were giving him back some rare thing he had offered her, she placed her hands on his breast.

"I will never give you up—never!" she repeated; "as you were my first, you shall be my only love."

The young man shook at her touch. Seizing her hand, he exclaimed—

"But, Lois,"—there was a deep pathos in his accents—"have you considered what it would mean, supposing I came back for you some time hence? Do you realize what it would be to have others always thinking of the stain on your husband's life, to have them distrusting him and commiserating you? Think of the torture, of the burning pain, for which there would be no cure!"

"Yes, there would be a cure," she murmured softly, the passion of her love, which had put a fierce energy into her previous words, having lost its fire for the moment. "I would surely find it in your love, and in the growing strength of your character, I will not give you up, because I want you to be strong, Rob. I hope and believe that from the fiery furnace of this trial you will come out purified and strengthened; and, Rob,"—never, while he drew breath, did he forget the ineffable delicacy with which she murmured her

next words—"a wife who knows both your strength and your weakness will help you as no one else can."

Before he could find speech she began again—

"Am I not bold, Rob? It is because I, we all, love you, know that you can do so much more in life, if you will, and—and—we fear that, unless you keep all the old ties unbroken, you may—grow careless."

Bob understood. They, his mother and Lois, suspected he might fall into evil, fresh evil as they thought, or into the recklessness which is too often worse than positive evil, for in it are all the germs of consummate wickedness. For a minute he was revengeful and angry. Then, the tempest passed, and he disdained himself for his weakness, as he termed it. Did he need further schooling to play his part well? Had he graduated in suffering, only to find that he could not listen in patience to noble words, because they were inspired by an erroneous belief for which he himself had besought credence? As he reflected, Lois, always the best and purest of women to him, grew in moral stature.

When he opened his lips the next time, his words were humble and broken. "I accept the sacrifice, Lois," he said, "but I shall never be worthy of you. A man unstained by—crime—would not be, and how can I ever become so?

But never fear that I shall do serious wrong again." He half-smiled as he noticed how aptly he was employing phrases and tones in keeping with his part of the sinner in the sad tragedy in which they all were actors. Continuing—

"With God's help, and He will grant me that if I have your and darling mother's prayers, you will never have need to blush for me again."

She flung herself on his breast in passionate tears. He scarcely recognized his dignified Lois, in the clasping, weeping woman.

"Rob, my darling, be good, be strong. Our prayers will be always with you and following you. We will forget all, except that you are working for the crown of a great redemption. You will come back to us, and you will then—marry me, Rob" (this with a sweet shyness), "and we will be all happy once more."

The presentiment that he would never return was strong upon him, but he had not courage to tell her so. He would say nothing to damp her newly-awakened hope in him.

"Rob," said Lois, after she had found her voice again, "will you make me a promise?"

"A thousand, if you wish it, dearest Lois. My whole life is yours henceforth—every moment of time, every impulse, every faculty."

"Nay, Rob, I only ask one great thing. I fear to pain you, dear, but I must say it."

"Speak out, Lois, do not hesitate. You have given me so much in giving me yourself, that nothing I can do will ever reach a thousandth part of its equivalent."

"Then, it is this. I do not ask what amount the bank lost—through you, but it must have been very large."

He interrupted her. "Very large," he said quickly.

"I feared so," was the response. "That makes the task the more terrible, but the victory will be all the greater. I wish you, Rob, to send home to the bank every penny of your earnings, be they little or be they much, in liquidation of the debt. You may make your fortune suddenly—others have done so across the seas, have they not?—but I do not count on that, nor must you. Stint yourself of everything except the meagrest necessaries of life and health, economize to the uttermost fraction, and send all your savings home regularly."

Thrilled by the girl's noble earnestness, Bob could not smile at what he deemed to be her lack of worldly knowledge, though tempted to do so.

"At such work as I shall be fit for out there, my

savings in twenty years would not clear the debt," he said.

"I do not suppose they would," she replied. "It is not so much for the sake of the bank, Rob, that I want your promise, but for your own."

"I scarcely understand, Lois. Would it not be best for me to let my savings accumulate there, where, if I saw a suitable opening for profitably using them, I would have them at command. In the colonies there must be plenty of such openings, and, by taking advantage of one or other of them, I might be in a position to sooner repay the bank."

"No, you do not understand me, Rob. After all, the money you—I mean what the bank lost—would have been yours in time, and it is not the debt I am anxious about. I am anxious only for you. If you resolve to lay aside—week by week, or month by month, for remittance home—all except your bare living expenses, you will have a definite aim before you. Every effort of exertion, every stroke of the pen, every drop of sweat, every minute spent in labour, every penny saved and gained, will be so many tokens of victory over your dead self, and so many stones in building up the new Robert Strathing." In the pleading of her love, in the justification of her love to herself, Lois became eloquent. She lifted up her face to

her lover's. Her words were not more intense than the earnest appeal in her features. As he was about to speak she placed a finger on his lips.

"One more word, Rob. I propose this course not as a penance nor as a punishment. Your sufferings in the present, and what you will have to suffer in the tearing asunder of the old relations will be surely accepted by Heaven as atonement. But it is a means of purification, of regeneration. My darling," she concluded with a passionate cadence, "if I were in your place I would live on half-a-crown a week, if at all possible, to do this."

Strangely moved, Bob said—"I believe you would, my Lois; and with Heaven's aid I will do so too. I will make you the promise."

"That is my Rob," Lois returned. "But I do not ask you to keep the promise always. Keep it for five years. Few men will be stronger, few purer, dear. Then come and claim me. I will never blush for you. Few will have the right to reproach you, and what if they choose to exercise it? I shall be at your side. The bank will give us enough to live upon, even though you take no part in its business."

And so the curious compact was arranged. The savour of the kiss that sealed it never departed from Bob. It was to his imagination more than

the confirmation of a vow. It was a consecration to the noblest life which, stigmatized as he was, was possible to him. From the moment Lois' lips touched his, the horror of his father's cruelty in thus condemning him to obloquy which frequently surged like a destructive wave through his consciousness, lost its power. The feeling of rebellion did not die at once—did not even perceptibly lose its grip on him at once. Slowly and surely, however, it evaporated, and in its stead arose an ardent desire to attain that pinnacle of manliness, the point where self dies utterly, its vitality extinguished in the rarefied atmosphere of the table-lands "to which our God Himself is sun and moon."

One other interview had Bob that night with his father. Here, the younger was the exhorter, the counsellor, and the director. The elder Strathing said little. If ever remorse and humiliation held possession of a human soul, they reigned supreme in the old man's bosom in that bitter hour. The burden of his cry was: "I will right you, my son, as soon as I dare, with Lois; immediately if anything happens to your mother." He had taken care, he further said, "to prepare such documents that in the event of his death justice should at once be done to his son, so far as could be possible, without injury to the bank."

The next morning Bob took train for Liverpool, whence the *Champion of the Seas* was to set sail.

Mr. and Mrs. Strathing and Lois went with him. Erring as she believed her boy to have been, feeble as she herself had become, the elder lady could not deny herself the sad pleasure of being with him to the last. The final good-byes were spoken just before the tug cast off the good ship in the Mersey estuary. His father clasped Bob's hands with a fervent: "God bless you always, dear lad; you are a hero!" Lois, as she kissed him, murmured—"Sweet, the promise; remember the half-crown;" hiding her emotion beneath a brave mask of smiles. But Mrs. Strathing could only press him convulsively to her. Her voice failed her, and her love and her fears found expression in precious tears—the words of dumb, pangful souls.

Three months afterwards, in the latter days of '59, the *Champion of the Seas* anchored in Hobson's Bay.

Amongst the hundred and fifty passengers whom good Captain Outridge landed on the shores of the new land was Robert Strathing. He had resolved, come what might, he would not change his name. He would take no *alias;* but he had also resolved that where not absolutely necessary he would not disclose it. It was possible that some knowledge of

the Strathing frauds might have reached the colony. The filaments of finance ramify in all directions, and he had no wish to unnecessarily erect any barrier in his own path. On board ship the blunder of a partially deaf purser had given him the choice of several cognomens—none correct. He had answered to Athing, Stathing, Ring, King, and even Thing indiscriminately. His letters he ordered to be detained in Melbourne office till he sent for them.

Once on shore, Bob, like most new chums, decided to experiment in digging. He had brought some money with him, and this and spasmodic luck carried him through several fields and rushes till he found himself on the Pleasant Creek. He had several mates—mostly "new chums"—of more or less gentle descent—some, like himself, with a history. It was to one of these latter, at one of his earliest "camps," that in response to a remark as to the rigid economy, almost parsimony, of his personal expenditure, he said—"If I could live upon half-a-crown a week, I would do it." The words had slipped out half unconsciously, for Bob was dreaming of home. His chum laughed, and he repeated the remark that not one miner in a thousand could live upon half-a-crown a day in those times, when for the commonest necessaries

famine prices had frequently to be paid. Bob was never able to make Lois' half-crown suffice for a week. When he got to the Creek home, he brought his expenses so low as to come within measurable distance of the sum. It was due to accident; this he candidly confessed to Lois in one of his monthly letters. If he had not chanced to hear old Carl Groth, the German butcher, lament that he could not get any one to put his books in order, he would not have had the opportunity of offering to drop into the shop once a week to square them. Nor, but for the same accident would Osborne, the general storekeeper, have heard of his accountancy abilities, and have begged him to do the like favour for the store-books. From neither of these good fellows would he receive payment, except in kind, though he saved them more in a week than he earned in a month by his pick. He supplied his own modest wants, and occasionally requisitioned on one or the other for goods to meet a case of want. But that was all. He would assist Pestle, too, with his registers if they got in arrears, and as he did not care to pay himself out of Pestle's stock of drugs (holding what that gentleman considered to be the very heterodox view that a blue pill was in no sense life-sustaining, and a

black draught not particularly useful as a body covering), he did not hesitate to accept remuneration in the shape of lent volumes. By the help of these accessories Lois' ideal of economy was nearly attained, and month by month remittances went homewards, old Pestle and Pestle's Melbourne correspondent being agent for the transmission, for Bob, ever sensitive to the shadow resting on his name, and wishful of avoiding the semi-publicity of the Post-office, had begged the chemist's permission thus to make use of them.

THE LETTER

"To Edward Strathing, Esq.,
"*Banker*,
"*Clement's Lane, London, E.C.*

"*Pleasant Creek, Victoria,*
"*December* 28, 1862.

"My Dear Sir,

"The black border of the envelope which covers this will have perhaps already told you of the sad, the awful news I have to communicate. Without preamble, I must inform you that your son, dear Robert Strathing, died in my arms on Christmas Eve, and was buried to-day. I tell you the fact boldly, and do not wrap it up, as perhaps I might have done, in roundabout phrases. For I

take it, sir, that you are a man. Only a man, a brave and strong man, could have had such a glorious son. 'Like father, like son,' they say, and it must, it must have been so in your case, and poor 'Half-Crown.' (Pardon me, it's the name we oftenest called him, and always spoke of him by—why, I will tell you later on, for it's not one of the things, I should say, that the dear lad would tell you himself). It is because I think you such a man that would prefer to take the whole force of the blow at once, rather than in instalments, that I say at the outset, 'Your son is dead!' That this news will be a heavy blow, no one that knew him can doubt. Here, he was idolized—I am not given to the habitual use of strong expressions—and yet we saw only half, perhaps not that much, of his nature. To those who saw him as he really was, in his complete manhood, what must his death be? I don't care much for poetry, but here and there a line has fixed itself in my memory. Some one—I think it was Shakespeare—has spoken of 'a loss darkening the world.' The loss of Bob has darkened our world for us. I fear me that our eclipse is as sunlight to the gloom which will overtake you and your family. Your sorrow will be so great that sympathy from us out here will be intrusive. Therefore, I hold my peace.

"I will tell you how he died. He died, as I fancy—'tis only my fancy—he had lived, a hero. It was on the afternoon the day before Christmas. Bob had 'knocked off' (our colonialism for stopped work) earlier than usual. He had done so to give the people on the Creek a treat. It's a long story to tell, but I had better go through with it, so that you may understand every detail about his last hours. You would never guess what the treat was. It was such a simple thing, and nobody on the diggings except your son would have thought of it. He had the knack of making simple deeds gracious and sweet, while other men would have only made themselves ridiculous. Only that day Bob had received by post from a Tasmanian lad a queer-looking parcel. When he opened it, he found it was a box containing three sprigs of English holly with the berries on. He had not had half-a-dozen words with the young fellow, when he was on the field, but, like everybody else, he swore by Bob. He had got tired of digging, and had gone home to his people in Launceston a few weeks before. He had heard, by chance, of a holly tree at New Norfolk, right the other end of the island, and that the tree had retained its berries up to that time. Off he went by coach, travelled the hundred and fifty miles there, begged

a piece of the holly, was refused, then stole several bits, the best on the tree, he wrote, with the ripest berries on, returned to Launceston, and sent the sprigs to Bob as a Christmas gift. The lad didn't know Bob's name, but he addressed the packet to 'Old Half-Crown, Pleasant Creek.' He was certain it would find its destination, and sure enough it did. As a colonial, the young fellow could only imagine, not realize, what those pieces of holly meant to Bob, and to lots of other Englishmen on the fields. While the youngster had lived in the camp, he had generally gone by the name of the 'Whelp,' and had been cursed indefinitely by every party he had worked with, but every British soul on that Christmas Eve blessed him heartily. Well, as I was saying, Bob was resolved to give the people a treat. There are people from every clime under the sun here; but sons of the old land are in the majority, and you will understand—no, I don't see, on second thoughts, how you will understand—how they would welcome a sight of holly berries on Christmas Eve. But nobody but Bob would have thought of giving them that sight, of sharing his rare pleasure with them. That was his treat—he took the holly in his hands, and he went nearly all over the field with it. How the news spread;

how women wept, and men too; how everybody remembered the old mother-land, though a cruel stepmother she had been to some of them; how many kissed the berries! Yes, kissed them; how some tried to grab them (colonialism again, sir), and how a big fellow from Yorkshire, and not long out, clutched one of the sprigs, and was knocked down for his pains (not by Bob)—how all this happened I have not space to tell. It did happen; and foolish as an account of it might appear in the *Times*, yet the effect of it wasn't foolish, by any means. Everybody felt happier, more Christmas-like, for that little lot of holly. And it was all Bob's idea and that young Tasmanian's. To get on with my sorrowful story—Bob, who had started from the west of the camp, had reached the eastern, the reefs or township part, on his march with the holly, and had just reached my shop and said, in his own bright way—'Here, Pestle, here's something for you, old man! Keep it quiet, or else you'll be burnt out to-night. I've been nearly mobbed getting this far.' I looked up from my registers (he used to help me with them sometimes), and saw he was offering me a piece of holly. Or rather, I thought I saw, for I could not really trust my eyes or my luck. To think of holly with the berries on at Christmastide! I'm a

Quaker—perhaps I'd better say I was—and don't care a button for Christmas ceremonies. But the holly was different. I went the length of my shop in one bound and grasped the sprig. If it had not been real, but only imitation, I believe I should have struck Bob, even though it was Bob. He let me have it, and was clearing away without thanks, just like his dear modest self, when, my eyes having got better—somehow they had dimmed for the moment—I said, 'Look here, Half-Crown, come to dinner to-morrow. I've often asked you and you would never accept. Do come, for the sake of Christmas and the holly!' He paused for a moment at the door, and then smiling, replied—'Well, I'll come, and the hospital can have the piece I was keeping for myself.' I saw then that he had two other pieces of the shrub in his hand. 'Thanks, Half-Crown, you're a good fellow to consent at last,' I said, and asked him what he was going to do with the last bit. I found he intended it for Mrs. Hamilton. She is our new doctor's wife—made a bad match of it, poor lady, but stuck to her husband through all this strange goldfield life. Bob, for a wonder, had never spoken to her, but he knew instinctively how she would appreciate the gift; so he asked me to send it to her. I promised, of course, and he

turned to go in the direction of the hospital, saying as he went out, 'It will be good medicine for them, poor lads!'

"Those were his words as he passed to his death. Always for others was Bob, always.

"He had not gone ten yards from my door when a miner came rushing down the hill, crying—'Campbell's has fallen in, and some of the fellows are buried!' Bob collared the excited man, exchanged a few words with him, and then called out to me—'Send out Hamilton, Pestle, and the stretcher at once, and you know what besides.' Away he sped over the hill towards Campbell's. This was a claim consisting of eight men's ground, originally taken up by Campbell and party as alluvial. They had not sunk far when they met the cap of a gold-bearing reef. When the fall occurred the party were driving for this reef at the level opening out from the shaft, at a depth of 300 feet. Water was oozing from the 'face,' usually an indication that the body of stone is not far distant, and in eagerness to verify the sign, and knowing little about 'reefing,' they had neglected to properly timber up the drive. This was the cause of the trouble. The timber supports had given way, and three out of the four men on day shift—the fourth was on top at the wind-

lass—were entombed. Bob was not the first on the ground, but he was the first to go down to reconnoitre—the others seemed to have lost their wits. Just as I arrived at the mouth of the shaft with the doctor, who, for a wonder was sober, Bob was hauled up. By this time hundreds were on the ground, and every eye was on Bob as he swung himself clear of the shaft. You see, they knew what he couldn't do it would be useless to attempt. Bob put a question or two to the mates of the buried men, so as to learn the bearings, and then looking round, he named four others to go down with him—the biggest and strongest on the field. There was risk, of course, but those chaps never gave it a thought. As he called them, they stepped out proudly.

"'We'll have them out in a couple of hours,' he said, 'and alive, if they haven't been killed by the fall. They'll have enough air for that time.' And then, as he was putting his foot in the noose, he turned and said to me, 'Old Pestle, mind you have everything right up here for them.' These were the last words ever heard from him in his unbroken manhood. There was the modest masterfulness in his tone, and there was the thoughtfulness for others in his words. Always true to himself, was Bob.

"What happened next I can't clearly tell. We on top sent a man down to the bottom of the shaft at intervals to learn how things were going on, and he always returned with the news that they were working famously. Two of the five were kept timbering, and the others relieved each other every ten minutes with the pick at the face. Bob took double turn though, besides giving an eye to the timbering. It was near the middle of the second hour, when the signal to haul up was hurriedly given, and a cry came up that we made out to be that they had got the men. First one, then two, then three, bleeding, maimed, and unconscious miners were brought to the surface. They had all been saved alive, and Hamilton gave hopes of their recovery. We were so intent on the rescued that we forgot the rescuers for a time. Only two of the five had come up; they told us that Bob and the others had stopped to make the timber 'sets' as tight as possible. All at once there roared up the shaft what might have been the explosion of a ship's broadside. Every face of the two thousand then on the ground blanched at the sound, for we all knew that the waters had broken in. Quick and sharp came the signal to pull. The men were at the bottom of the shaft. A dozen arms went to the windlass; round it flew

as quickly as it could be made to do, although it was evident there was a double load. Fifty heads bent down into the darkness of the pit, and strained to catch a glimpse of the men. At last they could be made out. Bob was left behind. 'What's the matter? Where's Half-Crown?' was the cry. 'The water's in. Waitin' down below; he made us come first.' There was a grim silence then, and an unspoken thought in all minds that these men had no right to come before Bob. I had it myself, though, of course, it was unjust. The fellows were barely level with the mouth when they were pulled off the rope to which they were hanging, one above the other, and then before any one could speak there was a man, who was known only as 'Yank,' rattling down the shaft. The men just come up wanted to tell how it all happened, but nobody listened. Every soul there, I believe, was praying that 'Yank' might get down before it was too late. Yank, I should tell you, was a fellow who, when he first reached the Creek, swore he wouldn't know Bob. He had to, the boys made him, and broke his leg in doing it; but so far from feeling sore against Bob, he loved him like a dog. We waited and waited, and not a sign came. Of course, we could not see whether the water had

risen in the shaft, for all we knew Yank might himself be drowning. We had lowered him till he had jerked the rope once—that was to stop—and it was certain, as all the rope had not paid out, that he had not reached the mouth of the drive. We could hear nothing except the noise of the water, sometimes soughing, sometimes booming. At last, it was exactly six o'clock, I recollect hearing somebody say, came the two sharp jerks. When the strain was felt on the rope the word was passed round that the burden was double. That meant that Yank had got Bob. It seemed ages before we landed them, for Yank had often to stop the haulage. When we did—great God!—Yank was seen to be dripping wet and covered with blood, holding Bob in his arms. We thought Half-Crown was dead. His back must have been broken as he grasped the side of the shaft in endeavouring to escape the inrush of water. A log, so Yank said, of one of the timber sets, must have been propelled by the terrible force of the stream against the body of the poor lad. We undid the cords that bound Bob to the rope and to Yank as tenderly as we could—it was a marvellous thing how Yank had managed to fasten them in the midst of the horror and the darkness—and then we laid him on a stretcher. The people

drew back to give him air, and to let the doctor examine him. When Hamilton looked up, we read death in his glance, and groans and sobs, that could not be stifled, arose from the crowd. The sound disturbed Bob. He opened his eyes and feebly glanced round. I went to his side, and asked him did he know me. His lips parted as if to speak, and I knelt down to listen. For some minutes he could not utter a word, but with an effort he lifted his hand and stroked my face. I have had rather a rough-and-tumble existence, Mr. Strathing, and some curious experiences, but nothing in my life went to my heart like that feeble stroking. I was that touched, that but for fear of distressing him I could have burst out crying. At last he found his voice, and the doctor said it was a miracle he ever spoke again. As it was, his words were sighed forth, and nobody heard them but me. 'Pestle,' he said, 'old friend Pestle,' and here he had to make a long pause, and in a sense I was glad of it; to think that with his dying breath he should refer to our friendship! 'Papers in tent—write—home ones—fondest love all—all, Pestle, mind, all!'

"The 'all,' sir, was uttered distinctly, as if he meant to convey that some one was included whom others might have thought undeserving of

remembrance. You will know, doubtless, whether it was so or not. The effort to emphasize it, and to make me understand, hurried the fatal moment. We thought, indeed, that he had already gone. But, in a while, he revived. Again I put my ear to his lips, afraid a syllable of his precious speech would be lost. 'Bury—Grampians,' was all I could make out of the whisper, however, and he turned his head as though he would look on those blue hills once more. There they lay in the west, steeped in the splendour of a glorious sunset; but he could not see them, because the silent throng stood between him and them. I waved my hand. The crowd, as if by instinct, understood, and, with scarcely a sound, moved right and left. He saw the hills then, but I don't think he saw the people. Again we thought he had left us. But no; his lips moved, and I caught, 'I'm going west too, old Pestle; going west too.' Another long pause, broken only by the sough of the wind, the creaking of a chain dangling from a poppet-head close by, and the sobs under breath from the crowd. Then he seemed to recall the present, and murmured, 'Remember—all—boys, Pestle. Give Half-Crown's love!' The words came with great gasps. Another interval, and then, 'Who saved me?' he asked. Saved! with his life ebbing like

that. Oh, it was pitiful. I whispered in reply, 'Yank!' and pulled Yank to the stretcher side. Something of your dear lad's brightness came back, as, smiling faintly, he said, 'Ah, Yank! sorry—been "interdooced"?' Yank broke out crying like a child. The brightness soon faded. For some time he lay still with his eyes open, peering into the heavens, with a far-away look. Suddenly he rose, as if he saw some one in the distance, and in a sharp tone of pleasure—yes, it was pleasure, there was no tinge of pain in it—exclaimed, 'Mother! Lois!' The last name he repeated more softly, though scarcely more tenderly, and then he fell back into my arms—dead; I closed his eyes.

"There, I have written it all down. Till I commenced to write I did not think I remembered more than a solitary detail or two—I have been dazed since it happened. But, I seemed to have noticed nearly everything in spite of myself. And perhaps it is best that you should have all the particulars of the noble fellow's last hours.

"We buried him to-day in a narrow valley of the Grampians; and Petre, one of the English Petres, a complete scamp, but one of the warmest admirers of Bob, recollected a talk he had once had with Bob when hunting in the hills. Bob had

pointed out a beautiful spot in a small valley at the foot of a cascade, and remarked that 'he would like to be buried there.' 'What! not in England?' Petre had exclaimed. Bob had said—'If I may not be buried there with honour, I would sooner rest here;' but in such a tone that Petre dropped the subject. He told me of the conversation the night Bob died, and we agreed that he should see if he could find the place. He went off the same night, camped out, and having found the spot returned next day for men to dig the poor boy's grave. He came in again last evening to act as our guide to-day.

"This morning at daybreak, every man on the field who could walk, or ride, or get carried, seventeen miles, followed Bob to his grave in the midst of the hills. Many women went, too; among them Mrs. Hamilton. As the coffin was being lowered, she placed on it a wreath of golden wattle and pure white roses intermingled, saying, 'From his mother.' It was a kindly token that spoke the thoughts of most there, and it fitly symbolized, so it seemed to me, what the dear lad was. The sweet perfume of our homely English flower mingled with the rich odour of the brilliant Australian blossom, just as Bob's life had a fragrance that was neither English alto-

gether, nor Australian altogether, but both combined.

"Thousands were in the procession. Few of England's greatest have had an equally, none a more honourable funeral. Many of those who walked out could not, of course, return to-day. They keep watch by Bob in this his first night in the silent valley.

"A piece of the holly was placed in his coffin.

"The miners have already subscribed to erect a monument over him, but we will do nothing till we hear from you.

"Because I write this, and because Bob asked me in his latest words to see to his papers, you will understand that I was more intimate with him than any other person here. I knew his name; no one else did. The whole field called him 'Half-Crown.' This was because of a story that he had promised some one in the old land to live upon half-a-crown a week until he achieved a certain object. If it was possible for any man to do such a thing, Bob was the man.

"Needless to say, I have not examined his papers and effects more closely than necessary to discover your address and to settle his affairs here. All his belongings go to you by the mail steamer that carries this. The shipping papers

will be transmitted to you in due course by my Melbourne agents.

"Pray command me in all things that you desire to be done.

"Petre has just brought me in a hastily-drawn sketch of the spot where we have laid your son. I enclose it.

"I have nothing more to say, except this—if you will pardon me for saying it—that, poorer as the world may be without Bob, it is immeasurably the richer for his having lived.

"Very sincerely yours,

"SAMUEL PESTLE."

EPILOGUE

In the heart of the Grampians, where two hills meet, and form a narrow triangular vale, is Robert Strathing's grave. Across the freestone obelisk at its head flit the shadows of giant gums, in whose leaves are gathered the wind-whispered monodies of centuries. By its foot pass tiny rivulets from the pool where drops, with a foamy plash, the silvery stream of a waterfall. The cadence of the dropping water and the rustling of the trees unite in a musical murmur that sounds to a listener like a never-ending sequence of sighs.

On the face of the obelisk is inlaid a marble slab, on which may be read the following inscription—

ROBERT STRATHING,
Aged 25 years.

Here he takes his rest.—
The drear music of an unjust blame
Moves him no more. Heaven itself
Breathes low his lullaby.

Over the epitaph is sculptured with rare skill a representation of the obverse and reverse of a coin encircled by a wreath, in which wattle-blossom and roses have been linked by the delicate touch of the artist. Lois herself brought out the tablet, which was graven and carved for her by one whose genius was before long to receive the well-earned tributes of fame and wealth, to whom Bob had endeared himself in college days.

Once every year, just after the spring has sent forth her couriers of sound and colour to tell of the glories and the sweetness of resurrected nature, and when "the tides of grass" in the valley "are breaking into foam of flowers," a lady comes from the quiet Tasmanian village where she lives, and makes a pilgrimage to the grave. Old Pestle, whose right to the adjective now none will question, drives her out to the sequestered spot.

Together they stand by the grave-side for a brief space. Then Pestle leaves her alone; it may be for an hour. As she hears his slow step returning to warn her that if they would escape the darkness, they must depart, she turns and kisses the stone and sod, pulls a few flowers from the pied mound, which she folds tenderly within a little case she has brought with her for the purpose, and tells him she is ready. The poor of Stawell district wish Half-Crown Bob's sweetheart would come oftener, for old Pestle, after each recurring visit, adds another function to his many offices by acting as almoner for Lois' benefactions. Lois is alone now. First, the old man passed away, and then his wife. Bob's death preceded theirs by a few months only, for Pestle's letter gave them their death-blow. Lois, now chief partner in Carlyon and Strathing, waits to follow them. She could have married long since; but she will never give to another the homage and the tenderness won by her dead hero, to whom, at last, she does justice. And she lives now but for the poor and suffering.

VESPER

THE fringed blinds flap gently in the evening breeze, which steals through the aperture of the raised window. Fearful that the sound, though it is as soft as the murmur passing through lovers' lips to lure their lovers, may disturb the patient, the snowy-capped nurse moves to fasten the drapery. She touches it lightly and the blind, being but lately hung on its window, answers to the spring, and flies with a rustle, to coil itself around its roller. Vexed with herself, for what she considers her carelessness, the nurse, while reaching her hand to the tassel to pull down the blind once more, turns her eyes towards the bed, to see if the sick man has been awakened. He needs sleep so much; sleep, if he is to be saved from death, will be his salvation; and—ah, the noise has awakened him. He makes with his head that half-turn on his pillow which is all the movement his strength—his weakness, rather—

will permit. And his eyes stare pitifully from the sockets into whose hollowness melt a thousand fine wrinkles, each one the impress of a separate pang. Six weeks before, those wrinkles had no place on the full, rounded cheeks, that curved only in laughter or in smiles. And now the contour has subsided into sharp angularities, and the flesh has been burnt away underneath the skin, which hangs so loosely on the bones. Six weeks ago, he was a man for whom women might hunger,—and now? So gaunt and hideous a thing is he, that he dreads, in his occasional lapses into consciousness, that he is repellent even to the "Sister" of the ward. But the good nurse sees only the patient, not the man. There is no sex in sickness.

"Nurse!" The lips shape, though they cannot be said to utter, the syllable.

She pulls the blind to the sill and hastens to his side, stooping over him to hear his words. He moves his head again in a fashion that would be deemed to be petulant were he in health, and makes her understand that he wishes the blind to remain up, not down. She returns to the window and eases the cord, so that the tassel presses noiselessly against, and rebounds from the upper frame. And she steps aside, so that he shall gaze

out into the realm of the falling night. She would raise him on his pillow, but she dare not. So near is he to the verge, the movement might push him over.

The distressed brain that is as yet not fully certain that the thing it sees is of this nether world, and not an appanage of some other sphere, strives valiantly to settle the doubt by endeavouring to identify the mountain peak that thrusts itself sombrely into the gold of the western sky. But the forehead puckers yet more numerously as the name eludes the weakened memory, and the lips seek an utterance which will not come.

Then the glory of the sun-setting passes suddenly, and the ruddiness and the gold, and the streaks of amethyst, and the puff-balls of fleecy cloudlets that seem to have wandered from

> The place where white dreams dwell
> And wreathe an unseen shrine,

lose their splendour in a moment, for over their magnificence drops a purple shadow. It is as though some artist, of a genius so lofty as to make him worthy to emblazon the walls of heaven itself, had wrought a work too marvellous for human sight to bear, and in sudden contempt for the poor mortal intelligence, drapes his great achievement

with a velvet pall. As the light goes out of the sky, and the black peak merges its outline in the mass of purple, a chill enters the room. The nurse feels it, and instantly, fearing for her patient, lowers the under-sash, which had been raised.

The top frame of the sash had stretched a black bar across the upper pane. The window lowered, the bar disappears, and—

A sorrowing cry, which was not all sorrow, but held a note of joy, like that which rings a cadence through a new mother's agony, startles the house.

"Vesper! O Vesper! My darling—come!"

He had risen in his bed and held out his arms towards the west. There, gleaming lucidly above the points of deepest darkness, which marked the mountain peak, shone the evening star. Virginal in the beauty which bore witness to the death of the day. She flashed into the room and carried him thence.

* * * * *

The door of the ward is opened carefully. It is the night-nurse come to relieve the day one. But the latter will not go. He had called her mercenary, had the man who now lay dead, when

the fever had begun to work fiercely upon him. "Begone!" he had exclaimed, "I will have no mercenary hands to touch me—give me those sanctified by love or none at all!" And then in the next breath he would tell her that he was but a wastrel, and his people had cast him off, and it had come to this, that in the battle for life he should have no ally but the hired nurse. Mercenary, in that she rendered the offices of tenderness for money, she was; but not otherwise. Else she had not given her hard-won evening leisure to preparing him for his coffin.

"If you do not mind, nurse," said the "day-duty" to the "night-relief," "I will lay him out." And the "night-relief" was but too willing, for the final service to the dead clay was repugnant to her.

"Have you reported the death?" she asks.

"No—not yet!" replies the other. "Will you do it for me?"

The "night-relief" takes the patient's card from the mantel (it is a private ward, therefore the card is not suspended from the head of the bed), and passes to the door to inform the matron and the doctor. The matron, however, meets her in the corridor. She carries a paper in her hand.

"How is private ward's temperature to-night?

I have a telegram for him, but do not think I shall give it to him."

"A telegram—oh! He's gone!"

"Ah! Poor girl!" and the matron hurries to the room.

A candle has been lit and the flame flickers in the draught of her entrance. A beam falls aslant on his face, and as the cheeks are already witnessing that resurrection of colour which so often lights the pyre of death with the fire of youth, the three women fancy, for the moment, he is not dead but sleeping, and smiling in his sleep. For the moment only.

Then the matron reads out to the nurses, who had seen many deaths, but were touched by this one peculiarly because of the life that was now speeding on its way to the chamber, the telegram—

"Arrived, beloved. Fast as love can bring me, I come—VESPER."

And when the day-nurse had clad him in his cere-clothes, she places between the crossed palms the bit of official paper. And the regulations of the institution are violated, for the hospital morgue will not receive its tenant this night. And the night-nurses steal out into the midnight, and

strip the marguerite bushes of their snow-stars, and weave in the still hours a tiny cross and a great wreath. And Vesper comes, with the dawn, with the dust of long travel upon her garments, but in her eyes the quenchless light of a fathomless love. Quenchless! But dimmed then, and while life endures.

BROTHERS TWAIN

I

"Bob—I will write to—Bob!"

The sick man turned writhingly upon his hard pallet. There was only a blanket between his body and the bed-frame, for the mattress had been exchanged long since for the money which had fed his children for three days; and the withering flesh was not so benumbed as yet by the pressed fingers of approaching death that the roughness and rigidity of the iron failed to inflict pain. "Bob," he quavered again, when he faced the door instead of the wall. "Yes, I will write to him!" Then he lifted the cane—solitary relic of the thousand and one uselessnesses which had once been necessaries to him—and tapped on the floor.

"Yes, father." A boy of twelve, or thereabouts, came and put his head in at the door.

"I want paper and ink, Ned. I wish to write a letter."

"A letter, father! Will it be one to post?"

"Yes, chappie. Why?"

"We haven't any money for a stamp, father—not a penny. And there's only one envelope left besides."

II

"DEAR ROBERT—The address is conventional and means nothing, and therefore I use it. I don't say 'Bob,' for that would mean something. It would mean, would it not, that there was a savour of the old days, our very earliest days, when we cared for one another, in my nostrils? And there is not, Robert—not the faintest!

"As ever, since elder boyhood, I hate you, and as you were never the one to change, I am sure you hate me. If I, who was always so variable, could be constant to that one passion of hate, it is certain you hate me no less.

"Then, still hating you, why do I write to you? Not for myself, you may be sure! If you can answer this at once your reply will be delivered by Wednesday. This is Monday—and by Thursday or Friday I shall be over the Boundary. So,

this is not for myself. It is for the children! And it is not for my share of the children, but for hers! There are two of them, and I beg you to recollect that they are hers as well as mine. A boy twelve, and a girl nine—the boy with some rags upon him, the girl with scarcely any; neither has had a full meal for a month. I write for them, Bob.

"There! The old boyhood's name has slipped off the nib. I did not know it, believe me, till it was done. I got weak for the moment, thinking of the children—there must be some link between the present and the tenderness of the earliest time—and it went down. I will let it stand.

"At the lowest ebb of the tide I write this—and there will be no spring to the tide this time. I shall have ten shillings—perhaps twelve-and-six—to-day from a certain source. Eight of that sum will go for arrears of rent, and on the balance, whether it be two shillings or four-and-six, the children and myself have to live till all is over. When I'm beyond the Line—do you remember how, on the home station, the old assigned cook used to talk of dying as crossing the Boundary? and we lads didn't understand him then; we thought he meant going beyond the settled districts,—parenthetical, as usual; every editor I

have scribbled for says I am too parenthetical, and why shouldn't I be? I am only a parenthesis myself, slung without apparent motive into the page of the world's life; and the style is of the man, you know—but the long and short of it is, that I won't leave enough to buy a clean shirt to be buried in. Not that it matters to me, but the poor children! Hers as well as mine—don't forget that!

"Brothers that we are, love never, since the first years, was lost between us. You thought when we came from school that I was favoured in everything, I was given everything you coveted, and you had nothing, you said, but what you were pleased to term my leavings. You were always vulgar, Robert. If you help my children—I mean hers—keep them free from that taint, I pray you. Yes, we hated one another; I, you, from superciliousness and pride, because I was the favoured one; you me, from envy. You always were a mean, jealous cur, Robert. That is the reason you have been successful, doubtless. It is so easy to be successful when one runs away from the conscience of a gentleman. Even when I won her from you, your jealousy generated a sharper malignity because with her I got Karanuk out-station. I could appreciate a wholesome hatred

because I had won the woman upon whom you had set your hopes, but a love of the woman complicated with creek-frontages and lightly timbered country I could not and cannot understand.

"However, that has all gone now—the money, and the station, and the love. Only the hatred remains—and the children.

"Perhaps I am a fool to write this way, perhaps I am not. If you are disposed to help the children, you will do so in spite of this last bubbling forth of my contempt. And if you will not help them, then, if beyond the Boundary they know anything at all, I shall surely be glad I did not abandon that hate at the ebbing of the tide which I had nourished at the flood.

". . . Do you see this stain? The bleeding came on again while I was sitting up to write, and the stigma of the 'ensanguined drops' will give you pleasure surely, O my brother! They would to me, I declare to you, were our positions reversed. They are so eloquent of what even you, dear sir, with your M.L.C.-ship and your stations, and your dummied selections—perjury must have been congenial to you, good brother Robert—and your flocks and herds will have to do; you, even you, will have to pass the Boundary!

"And the boy—he's come back, and says he

received but nine shillings for the cane. The Jew, because the lad had defaced the engraving of the name, gave him that and no more. He has paid the rent and brought back elevenpence, and a penny stamp. Really, how grateful I am to Parliament for enacting penny postage! Now, had it been twopence still, the youngsters would have been short one pennyworth of milk—a full meal for them, O my brother, according to our present dietary scale. Oh, and by the way, you voted against that reduction. Had you some premonition of how great a blow you could inflict upon me, could you involve me in double expenses for postage in my extremity? No, of course not; to suppose that would be to presume you had occasionally some swift vision into things unconnected with barbed wire and the price of shearers' rations; which, as old Euclid hath it, would be absurd.

"Yes, elevenpence. And do you know what that elevenpence represents? Father's gold-headed cane! From the earliest boyhood when you rode it straddle-legged—I laugh now as heartily as my lung will allow me, to recall how even your infantile steed used to trip you up, and so forecast the miserable horsemanship of your latter years—Heavens! the newest jackeroo on your run ridicules you when you mount your horse—what am I

writing?—when you are assisted to mount your horse, I should say—I say from boyhood you craved to have that cane. And now, I have sold it—to a Jew, Robert, to a Jew!—Benjamin, of Swanston Street. Perhaps you would like to buy it after all? He will not charge you surely more than two hundred per cent. profit. I hope he won't charge you less! I shall grieve beyond the Line if he does, for I should like to know you had to pay twenty-seven shillings—twenty-seven drops of your heart's blood—for what you always thought should have been yours by right. Still, even if you pay twenty-seven shillings for it, the gold will be cheap at that. For you, of course, will only value it for the gold—you couldn't enter into the sense of that subtle companionship which links a man to a cane his dead friend or foe has carried—at least a guinea and a half. Think of it, O my brother! You might make four shillings and sixpence upon an expenditure of twenty-seven shillings. Look at the gain!

"So—my strength will not suffice to write another five lines even if I had paper—I close.

"Dear Robert, believe that in death as in life I am

"Your hating and hated

"CHARLIE.

"P.S.—I have strength yet to strike out 'Bob,' and I do it. Still—remember the children for her sake."

III

"Father, here's a gentleman to see you."

"A gentleman! Surely not! Oh! it is you, Robert! It is a natural mistake of the lad's. He has not sufficient knowledge of the world yet to perceive that a man may wear fine clothes and a gold cable for a watch-guard, and own a gold railway pass, and still not be a gentleman! So you got my letter? I am sorry that I cannot offer you a seat. We have been doing without chairs for some time."

"Any further insults?"

"At present—none! Chappie, this is your uncle!"

"Boy, here are two sovereigns. Go and buy back the cane you sold two days ago!"

"Ah—Robert, you do value it, then? I thought I could not err in my judgment. But are you not indiscreet in giving so loose a commission? He might give more than twenty-seven shillings!"

"Never mind that! I could not spare the time to go for it myself. I came here as speedily as I

could—and you're obviously too near the Boundary, as you say, for me to leave you now."

"Robert, you are positively kind! And you've come to do something for the children?"

"Before I answer you, let me remind you that once I swore I would have that cane before you died, and would flog you with it. Do you remember?"

"Surely, O my brother, yes!"

"I am glad of it. Now I will answer you. I shall do nothing for your children!"

"Then why—if it is not impertinent—did you come here?"

"I cannot flog you with that cane now. But I can spurn you with it when you are carrion. I came for that—and to see you die!"

BENEATH THE SUMMER SUN

The blue infinitudes of the skies and the distant ranges were swimming in a lustrous haze to the eastward—but to the far westward, smoke upon smoke, thunderous in its aspect and in the rumble of its rapid encroachment on the doomed timber. And the men, hauling their sleeping caravan up the steep hill, beyond where Hartley Bridge now throws its span, shivered, as they gasped under the stress of their labour and in the stifling heat. They prayed for the night-fall. But it was as yet only high noon. And they knew as they prayed that their prayer was not to be answered. God might be willing to listen, but the System had cut off connection during working hours.

God might be merciful, but the new road organization was just. Being high noon, there would be no temporary lull in the labour for an hour, and no stoppage of it for six hours. Let the heavens burst with their brassiness, the new road regula-

tions were imperative. So Ensign Manning, of the ——th Regiment, believed.

To do him justice, he believed it. All his instincts—he was but a boy—leaned to the side of good-comradeship and sympathy. But his orders were clear and precise—and this was his first command—and he was anxious, of course, to acquit himself well; and equally of course, the transports under him were terrible fellows! If they were not terrible fellows, justly smitten of fate, completely beyond reform, why, of course again, his superiors in Sydney would not have ordered them to the iron-bound gangs on the mountain roads. English law was ever just; and it was not his to reason why; and his privilege and his obligation as a true Englishman was to do his duty; and—and so forth.

Being only a boy, how was he to understand that never yet did the devil forge so potent an instrument of evil (save one) as an Englishman's belief that when he acts from a sense of duty he must be right? And that exceptional one was the mediæval Spaniard's notion that the more finished fiend he proved himself the more exquisite pleasure he conferred upon the Mother of God and the Saints.

* * * * *

Now the Road Regulations, the Bible of the Blue Mountain iron-gang, were explicit as to the hours of work. The gangs were not supposed to labour between one and two p.m., but were supposed to be wielding the merry pick or the tamping-iron, or performing other soul-saving exertion, between five-thirty a.m. and six p.m.

And by the kinder grace of the Authorities, the dragging over ridge and range of their lumbering hell-upon-wheels was regarded as work upon the roads. The more brutal system of the earlier days had demanded that transports should remove their sleeping-vans from depôt to depôt in their own time, but the System at the epoch of this our present story was becoming humane, and it conferred upon the men the sweet boon of their own leisure. It was, however, a just system as well as a humane one—and therefore in the System's time the men had to work.

So they bent to the cable-thick rope, for all that the strands burnt and blistered like red-hot iron, and they trembled and stumbled step by step—to the length of their fetters. Which were not like red-hot iron, but were.

They had reached the razor-edge of a ridge. The caravan poised its twelve-feet length of unwieldiness on the crest, and the sergeant of the

guard, walking a yard behind the van on one side of the road—so that such shade as was obtainable from the withered gums might refresh him—called across the road to the subaltern in command.

"Let 'em chock her a bit, sir!" Beneath the respectfulness of his tone was a sympathy, and more than one head beneath the leathern caps turned and sent a thankful look through dull eyes. He had done what he dared.

"They will have an hour's rest at one o'clock!" It was not Manning's fault if the earth spewed heat as well as the heavens. The regulations were imperative, and duty was duty. So the wheels were unchocked—then.

* * * * *

No. 8 was an old man. There was the benignancy of age in the grey hair and the white furrowed face. An uneducated man, that was plain, too, but from the glazing eye glimpses of intelligence slid out at moments; and feeling—the dumb, inarticulate feeling that you see in the eye of a dog. He was the sort of man of whom Wesley made his earliest class-leaders—who spoke of what they felt and not of what they knew, for they knew nothing save the desperate need of sinning souls and the goodness of God. This, at least, is what you could have read in his face. At

the same time you would have been, so the Systemers would have told you, quite in error. For Bill Cousins, No. 8, was a mighty offender. The law had held him in bonds these ten years, and would do so for ten years more. His offence was heinous, and the portion of the wicked here and hereafter was his, or to be his. Even as he stands here, deceptively venerable in aspect, gasping long, long breaths, and praying mutely to his God to forgive him the sin of repining at his lot—for he does repine sometimes—it is questionable whether he should be allowed to live. The law had sentenced him to be hanged, drawn, and quartered, but the gracious prerogative of mercy had been exercised and his worthless life had been spared so that he might repent of his awful crime. And—that crime?

There are some offences against the law that may not be named audibly. This is one of them; hence, let us whisper it: "No. 8" had thrown a stone against a Bristol merchant's window in a Reform Bill riot.

There are many thousands in the indictment—a copy lies open before us now—but that is the plain meaning of the volume of involved verbiage. The Crown called it treason, but really he broke a window!

And so old Bill Cousins deserves no sympathy from us, though he be sixty years of age, and tender of heart, and prayerful of speech, and mild of temper—and panting for breath beneath the burning blue of a January sky in a droughty summer.

* * * * *

The "hell-upon-wheels" swung upon the ridge, as six of the twelve men held her up with their backs against her, while the rest of the twelve eased her down with their crowbars. The privates of the guard, distant (as per regulation) ten paces on either side, watched the operation and were grateful for it. They got some shade, and stood easy resting on their muskets.

Slowly she descends. The three-foot diameter wheels, solid circles of timber, revolve reluctantly, and grate and crumble the granite rubble of the rocks. Perhaps one in fifty is the gradient, no great task to achieve even for a laden bullock-team in these days, when the art of the bullocky is dying out of the coast-lands; but a fit job for human refuse, such as No. 8, in the hot summer days of the early epoch. There was not one of the twelve that did not go maddened and desperate, as they fought that dreadful home of theirs. For she became endowed with life—she quivered—she

reeled—she shrieked terribly as the devil in her, in the moment of contact with a boulder, twisted out the rude axle-pin, jerked off the left rear-wheel, and stretched her ponderous mass on her back. Over the cries of the gang, over the clank of the irons, over the crash of the beaten-in timber, over the groans of—of some one, rings stridently from among the spare shadows cast by a lank bloodwood—"Father!"

* * * * *

From side to side, struck this way, struck that way, went the gangers, who in the fear of the first shock had grouped themselves on the near side of the overturned caravan. The sergeant parted them with stinging blows, thrusting them apart as the diver does the waves. And they had not recovered their balance—there is no elasticity of step when the feet are drawing behind them seven-pound chains—when he, somewhat inconsistently as it may seem, considering his immediately preceding action, called upon them to help him.

"For God's sake! Wells, Beattie, Western—all o' you, help me! He's my father!"

And the eyes in the grey head just protruding beyond the edge of the van timbers open slowly at the words. The lids separate with a feeble tremulousness—but the light that shone in them!

It shamed the blazing of the noon-day; and no wonder, for their luminousness was not of this world.

"Don' 'ee, Jimsey! I—be—aw' reet!" And then the sergeant and the transports saw enough to convince them that to move the van would be to hasten death.

The sergeant, dashing his shako to the ground, knelt beside the prostrate, overlain form.

"O, father—father—I was feered o' this!" The piteous tearless sobs of the stricken man shook him fiercely. "I knew 'twould be so, sooner nor later!"

"Don' 'ee,—Jimsey,—lad! Now, don' 'ee!" The old man crooned this, and then his face changed fearfully. The terror of a great agony was in it, and it was not good to look upon. He pleaded (in a voice that brought the sweat to the gangers' brows, and to the boy subaltern, who was the symbol to them of the Great and Merciful and Just British Empire, a faintness that he never forgot) for the fast-speeding death to come quicker.

"O God—O good God! Be 'ee merciful now, an' take I quick!"

The sergeant turned his head and showed a ghostly face to the gang.

"Go 'ee 'way, men!" And he stooped once more over his dying father.

The gangers withdrew some paces—stealthily as though they were in a sick chamber. Some stooped as they moved and drew up the block of wood to which their chains were attached, so they should not clank.

Ensign Manning alone stayed where he stood. In his glance around the sergeant had not seen his officer, and perhaps would not now have noticed him had not the Ensign spoken.

"Is he really your father, sergeant? And can't we do anything? Can't we get him from under?"

The sergeant sprang up, and stood for one instant swaying on his feet as though nerving himself, after counting the cost of striking his officer, to dash Manning to the ground.

Manning certainly expected a blow, but did not flinch.

The blow, if intended, did not fall. For the old man spoke.

"Jimsey, now—don' 'ee! Yo' promised I as yo'd do yo' dooty!"

The sergeant knelt again. "Eh, dad—I did! An' I'll do it yet, for all they killed yo'!"

"An', Jimsey—yo'll seek—th' Kingdom, lad?

Yo'd no go to the bad now poor old dad es gone? Thou was allus good t' I!"

"I tried to, father!" The sobs were not tearless now.

Manning turned away. He made a false clutch for his scabbard at his side. He had to make a second clutch before he grasped it.

* * * * *

What immediately happened then, no one of the gang or of the guard could say later.

Whether the old man, moved by his pangs, asked his son, or whether it was the sergeant's own thought, no one to this day knows. But a private of the guard saw the sergeant bend down and press his father's lips with his own, and then brush his clammy forehead with them. And then they heard a shot, and while yet dumb and stupefied with the report, they saw the non-com. rise from the side of his dead, and pass to where Ensign Manning was standing. He saluted, and holding out the still smoking pistol said—"'Twar better so, sir! There be no doctor nearer'n Emu or Bathurst. An' I couldna bear t' see th' o'd dad suffer. I give mysen up, sir!"

The Ensign would not order him into arrest.

* * * * *

There are other meetings of convict father and soldier son recorded in the painful annals of the convict times. Only one, however, was more tragic in its results. And in that one also did a "hell-upon-wheels" play a part.

THE END

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